

WORLD SERIES: PHILLIES IN '08—AND '09, TOO?

Sporting News

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

MAGAZINE



COLLEGE BASKETBALL PREVIEW

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Week of November 10, 2008

SN CONVERSATION

• QBs from Texas are popping up everywhere

NBA

• What was Greg Oden thinking on opening night? He'll tell you

NFL

• Matt Ryan isn't going to wait



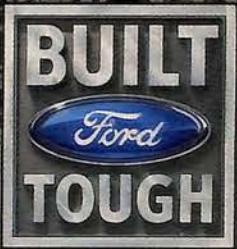
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ON THE COVER

28 College basketball preview

Don't put too much pressure on Roy Williams' Tar Heels: "We can't put all our eggs in the basket and say, 'We've got to win the national championship or on April the seventh we're going to meet on the top of the Smith Center and everybody jump off.'" Win or lose, North Carolina is only one of 65 reasons why this season will be one to remember. —By Mike DeCourcy

Cover Photography By Bob Leverone / SN

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Phillies closer Brad Lidge needed to take his lumps in the playoffs before he could win it all: "That made me very hungry to get back in the postseason." His is one of six tales of the World Series that must be told. —By Ryan Fagan and Stan McNeal

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How big is high school football in Texas? "They've made movies and written books about it. You can't help but get wrapped up in it," says LSU quarterback Jarrett Lee, one of six Division I-A QBs who talked to us about how everything is better in their home state. —By Dave Curtis

58 Right here, right now

When it comes to learning, Falcons rookie quarterback Matt Ryan doesn't waste time. "He never makes the same mistake twice," offensive coordinator Mike Mularkey says. Now you know why the Falcons started 5-3. —By Mike Tierney

66 'Grounded?' Really?

"I'm a firm believer that you have to take advantage of opportunities when you have them because who knows if you'll ever get them again." Thanks in part to wideout Larry Fitzgerald, the Cardinals are doing just that this season. —By Clifton Brown

PHOTOS

70 Big man, big stage

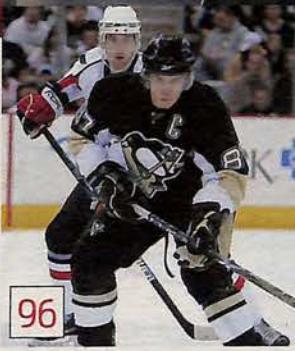
What was going through Greg Oden's mind during his first night in the NBA? "What do you guys think of my beard? I'm feeling this look on me right now."



Texas Tech's Graham Harrell and Mississippi's Jevan Snead (inset) are two of 18 Division I-A starting quarterbacks who played high school football in Texas.

THE ROTATION

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Sidney Crosby is just one reason the NHL is coming back strong.

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MULTIMEDIA

Sporting News
MAGAZINE

Got something you'd like to ask UConn's Hasheem Thabeet, the star of *Sporting News*' No. 2 college basketball team? E-mail it to yourturn@sportingnews.com. Thabeet will take questions from SN readers in an upcoming issue.

Sporting News
TODAY

Our college football roster includes 23 star players who write weekly diaries and 18 coaching greats who cast their votes each week in the Legends Poll. It's all in the first digital daily sports newspaper. Sign up for free at sportingnewstoday.com.

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RADIO

For Hall of Fame NFL analysis, tune in to *The Troy Aikman Show* from 7-8 p.m. ET every Thursday through January 29. Listen on affiliates, on Sirius XM Satellite Radio and at radio.sportingnews.com.

Sporting News
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With college basketball's national signing period set to tip off, head to our new *Recruitnik* blog for all the news about the stars of tomorrow. We have daily updates at sportingnews.com.

IN CASE YOU EVER WONDER
WHAT A REAL DRINK TASTES LIKE.



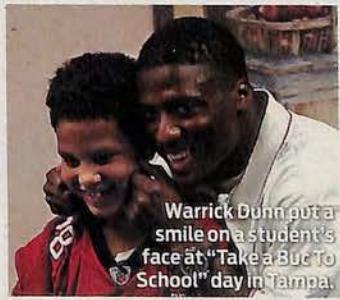
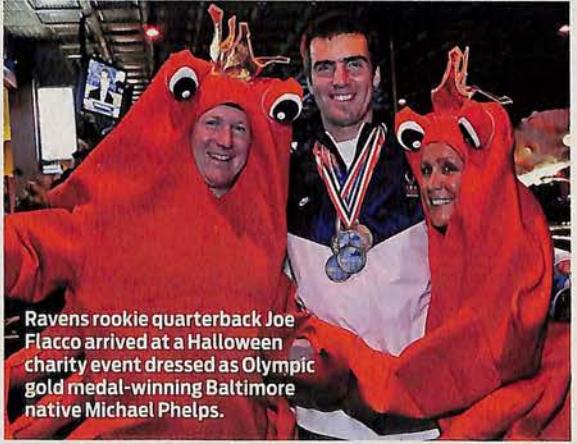
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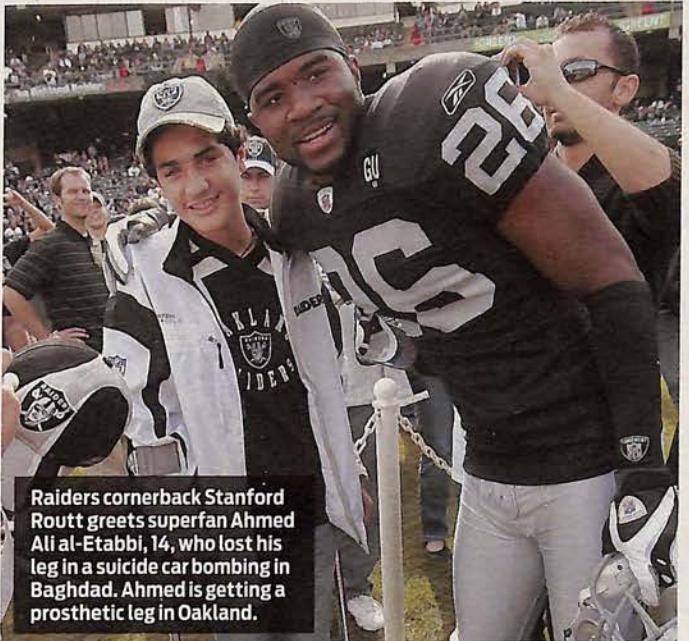
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In Pictures

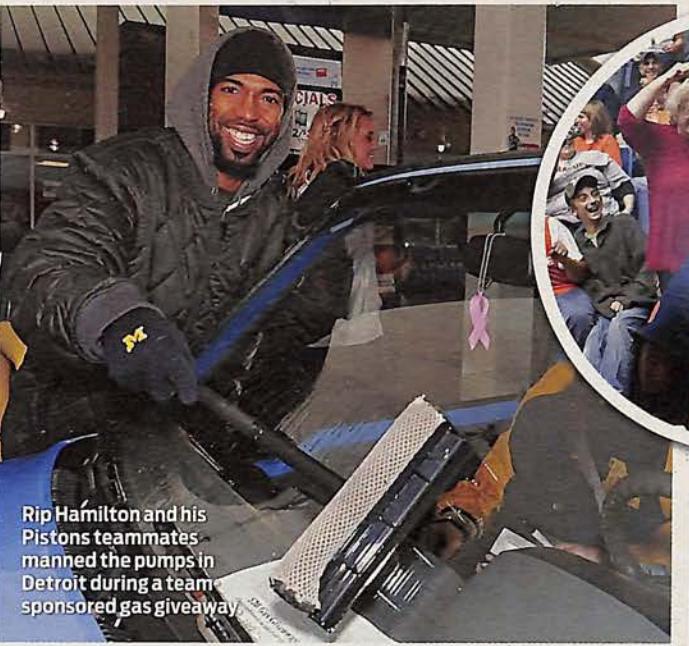




Raiders cornerback Stanford Routt greets superfan Ahmed Ali al-Etabi, 14, who lost his leg in a suicide car bombing in Baghdad. Ahmed is getting a prosthetic leg in Oakland.



The Big Dance isn't for another four months, but Syracuse guard Jonny Flynn (inset) and Georgetown coach John Thompson III are already in the spirit. Thompson boogied with student Jacqui Rice, daughter of NFL great Jerry Rice, while Flynn got down with an Orange fan.



Rip Hamilton and his Pistons teammates manned the pumps in Detroit during a team-sponsored gas giveaway.



Tiger Woods and Derek Jeter played a little Xbox 360 while filming a spot for the Gillette-EA Sports Champions of Gaming Tournament.



The sod has been laid at the new Yankee Stadium, just in time for the Yankees to show it off to free agent Manny Ramirez.

2008 SN BASEBALL EXECUTIVE OF THE YEAR

Andrew Friedman

Rays

The Rays' trip to the World Series was a bit shocking, but a series of intelligent moves—at the major league level, in the scouting department and in the amateur draft—made success almost inevitable. Andrew Friedman, the Rays' executive vice president of baseball operations, deflects credit for the franchise's rapid improvement. For leading the turnaround, though, his fellow front office types (43 general managers and assistant general managers) voted the 31-year-old Friedman *Sporting News*' executive of the year. He then spoke with SN's Ryan Fagan about the Rays' amazing season.

SN: What has this year's success meant to this organization?

FRIEDMAN: It's a culmination of a lot of hard work by a lot of different people, and that's one of the most rewarding parts, at least for me, is how all of our various departments throughout baseball operations have a hand in this. All have their fingerprint on the composition of this roster. It's something for us that we've got our nucleus under control for a number of years. And we've got more talented players coming. Our goal, along with now just reaching this level, is to be in a position to sustain it for many years, and we feel we're well-poised to do that.

SN: How important has June's first-year player draft been in terms of building this team?

FRIEDMAN: It's been critically important, and it will be equally as important for us going forward to be able to sustain a competitive team. We can't build through free agency; we have to build through the amateur draft and international scouting, through player development, to be able to maintain a core of players able to compete in the American League East.

SN: How are you better as an executive now than when you first took this job?

FRIEDMAN: Obviously, I think this is an industry such that you're learning every day, and I think I'm definitely better today than I was a year ago. And I hope I'll be a lot better a year from today than I am now. You know, the game changes



Like his team, Friedman has become pretty darn popular in an extremely short period of time.

so frequently in terms of strategy, in terms of player personnel, in terms of how you deploy your resources. You always have to try to be thinking ahead, and we have a great staff in that we always challenge each other. And that's something that's been needed in my personal development.

SN: Everybody loves the blockbuster trading deadline moves, but talk about the importance of the under-the-radar deals that helped shape this team, specifically the one you made to get shortstop Jason Bartlett and righthander Matt Garza.

FRIEDMAN: One thing I think we did well at the end of last season was critically analyzing our organization and the depth we had and deciding which players we were going to move ahead with and which ones we'd be willing to trade. Improving our pitching and improving our defense were two big components of our offseason goals and also improving our organizational depth. And that gets to the deal for Willy Aybar and the signing of Eric Hinske and a number of things that have gone under the radar that have contributed greatly to our success.

SN: You seem to be on the same page with your manager, Joe Maddon. How key is that?

FRIEDMAN: It's very important. We have tremendous communication—we certainly don't always agree, but we have a phenomenal working relationship. And I think that's something that benefits the organization in terms of that continuity.

How the Rays became great

The Rays' rally cry this season was "nine equals eight," as in nine guys playing together will result in one of eight playoff berths. Keeping with the theme, the nine best moves of the Andrew Friedman era in Tampa Bay:

- Hiring Joe Maddon.** There isn't a skipper in baseball more acutely aware of his players' strengths and weaknesses.
- Trading for Matt Garza and Jason Bartlett.** Friedman accomplished three goals with this one move last offseason: He improved his infield defense, strengthened his rotation and traded away a clubhouse distraction in outspoken outfielder Delmon Young.
- Signing Carlos Pena as a free agent.** Pena was dumped by the Tigers, Yankees and Red Sox in 2006 before Friedman signed him in February 2007.
- Selecting Evan Longoria with the No. 3 overall pick in the 2006 draft.** The 2008 *Sporting News* A.L. rookie of the year had 27 homers and 85 RBIs despite starting the season in the minors and missing more than a month with a fractured wrist.
- Selecting David Price with the top pick in the 2007 draft.** Price blew through the minor leagues in 2008 as a starter before showcasing his considerable talents as a stopper in the postseason.
- Rebuilding the bullpen.** The offseason signing of Troy Percival got the headlines, but in late July 2007, Friedman traded for Grant Balfour and Dan Wheeler on back-to-back days.
- Trading for Willy Aybar after the 2007 season.** He scored two of the Rays' three runs in Game 7 of the ALCS, but it wasn't the first the team had seen of Aybar's value. During the regular season, he played all four infield positions.
- Signing Cliff Floyd and Eric Hinske after the 2007 season.** The two veterans were clubhouse leaders, and they had 31 homers and 99 RBIs combined this season.
- Shifting Akinori Iwamura from third base to second.** The move made room for Longoria at third and kept Iwamura's bat atop the order.

—Ryan Fagan

Write us

It's like *Jeopardy*: All letters to the editor must be phrased in the form of a question, even if it's "Can you believe *Sporting News* picked Gonzaga to be a No. 1 seed?" We'll choose our favorites and answer them in this space and regularly in *Sporting News Today*. E-mail your questions to yourturn@sportingnews.com, along with your name and hometown.

YOUR QUESTION:

For years, all you heard was that Chris Osgood winning the Stanley Cup was a fluke and that he was the worst goalie to ever do so. That really bothered me. But now that he carried Detroit to the Cup and is clearly the No. 1 guy this year, does he feel at all justified or more confident?

— John Clark, Fair Haven, Mich.

YOUR QUESTION:

Will the Braves ever return to the dominance of the Ted Turner era? Or have payroll restrictions relegated them back to the pack?

— John Drennan,
Pinebluff, N.C.

YOUR QUESTION:

I know that Joe Buck has worked on 10 World Series. Which one was his favorite—and why?

— Nick Rousseau, St. Louis

YOUR QUESTION:

I saw where Danny White, my favorite Cowboys quarterback of them all, was coaching in the Arena League. Does he aspire to one day coach in the NFL? I'm sure there'd be a ton of teams that he'd make better overnight.

— Terry Trout, Waco, Texas

YOUR QUESTION:

Never did I think Michigan football would fall as far as it has this year. I'd be curious to hear whether players from the Lloyd Carr era think Rich Rodriguez has this program headed in the right direction.

— Ben Stutz, Bloomington, Ill.

THEIR ANSWER:

Chris Osgood
Red Wings goalie

John,

No, I don't feel justified because the people that are writing or saying that stuff are usually not qualified or don't know what they are talking about. Yes, I do feel more confident, but at the same time, I've put the work in on and off the ice. I always knew I could do it again and never questioned myself.

THEIR ANSWER:

John Schuerholz
Braves president

John,

As has been proven time and again in baseball, spending the most money has never guaranteed the most success. Although our last few years haven't been as successful as the previous 15, we still have the same commitment, determination, team-building philosophy, good baseball administrative personnel and ownership support that will allow us to win again.

THEIR ANSWER:

Joe Buck
Emmy-winning sportscaster

Nick,

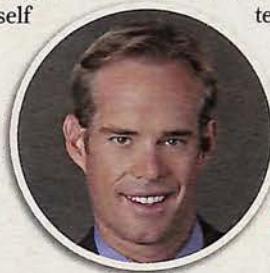
I would for sure say the 1996 World Series. It was my first on national television and the Yankees' return to glory under Joe Torre. As a 27-year-old, I was just hoping to get through it and not embarrass myself because of the pressure that comes with all things New York. They say you never forget your first, and in this instance, they are right.

THEIR ANSWER:

Danny White
Pro Bowl quarterback

Terry,

I have had offers to coach in the NFL but nothing significant enough to get me to leave Arizona and the AFL, which I love coaching in. But if the right offer for the right team and coach came along, I would love to coach in the NFL.



Joe Buck

THEIR ANSWER:

Marlin Jackson
Colts cornerback

Ben,

I am very confident in Rich Rodriguez, and the staff that he has in place is great. Either way, old staff or new, this was going to be a rebuilding year. We just lost too much talent from the previous team. We may take a few shots on the chin this year, but next year we will contend for a Big Ten title, and then the following year we will win the Big Ten title.



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Survey Says ...

- Tougher fans: The Big Apple or Philly?
- Tougher sport to call: The national pastime or NBA?

Sporting News surveyed a dozen World Series umpires—current and former—about those topics and more

SN's panel

Larry Barnett
1975, 1981, 1984, 1990

Bill Deegan
1976

Bob Engel
1972, 1979, 1985

Dale Ford
1986, 1997

Bruce Froemming
1976, 1984, 1988, 1995

Bill Haller
1968, 1972, 1978, 1982

Ted Hendry
1990

Dave Phillips
1976, 1982, 1987, 1993

Dutch Rennert
1980, 1983, 1989

Dale Scott
1998, 2001, 2004

Tim Tschida
1998, 2002, 2008

Vic Voltaggio
1989

Do you favor more instant replay or less?

➤ Less	5
➤ As is	4
➤ More	3

They said it

"More. It gives the umpires even more opportunities to get it right." — **Bob Engel**
 "Less. Baseball has survived 100 years without it, and it takes all the color out of the game. This is why you have umpires. The fans love the rhubarbs." — **Dutch Rennert**
 "As it is. It's a great tool for the umpires to use on extremely difficult calls to judge. I might consider out and safe on a once-a-game basis, similar to a manager checking the bat (for cork) once a game." — **Dave Phillips**

Which pitcher was/is best at working the corners?

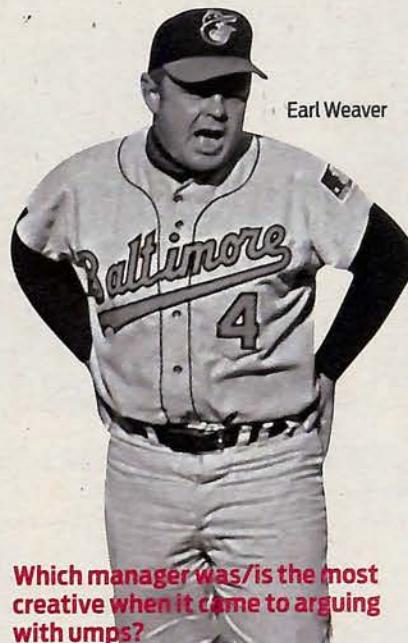
➤ Catfish Hunter	2½
➤ Roger Clemens	1½
➤ Greg Maddux	1½

Also receiving votes: Bert Blyleven, Mike Cuellar, Pat Dobson, Tom Glavine, Orel Hershiser, Tommy John, Jamie Moyer, Jim Palmer, Bret Saberhagen, Mike Scott, Tom Seaver, Frank Tanana, Mike Flanagan, Scott McGregor.

They said it

"From an umpire's perspective, it is always much easier to work a pitcher that throws strikes and for the most part puts the pitch where he wants it. That was Roger Clemens." — **Vic Voltaggio**

Catfish Hunter



Earl Weaver

Which manager was/is the most creative when it came to arguing with umps?

➤ Earl Weaver	2½
➤ Billy Martin	1½

Also receiving votes: Walter Alston, Whitey Herzog, Tommy Lasorda, Tom Trebelhorn, Dick Williams, Ted Williams.

They said it

"Earl Weaver was the one who did silly things such as throw his hat, kick dirt, curse and turn his hat around. Lou Piniella is a throwback to Billy Martin and Leo Durocher and Weaver, which are becoming extinct in the game today. Most managers are teachers rather than managers. Ralph Houk was generally very good, but when he wanted to put a show on." — **Dave Phillips**

"None. I would tell them, 'Tell me what you want, and I'll tell you why you can't have it.' — **Bill Deegan**

Fans in which city gave/give you the most grief?

➤ New York	4
➤ Philly	2½

Also receiving votes: Boston, Chicago, Toronto.

They said it

"I learned long ago never to comment on fans. You never can win." — **Dale Scott**

"Blue Jays fans are not very knowledgeable about baseball." — **Vic Voltaggio**

"All were great, but Yankee fans could be very rowdy. Fistfights seem to break out a lot in that stadium." — **Dave Phillips**

Who was/is the most professional player to deal with?

➤ George Brett	2
➤ Robin Yount	1½

Also receiving votes: Rod Carew, Ken Griffey Jr., George Hendrick, Catfish Hunter, Al Kaline, Harmon Killebrew, Mike Lowell, Buck Martinez, Mike Matheny, Joe Morgan, Kirby Puckett, Harold Reynolds, Brooks Robinson, Mike Schmidt, Willie Stargell.

They said it

"I think if you talk to George Brett, he was not very proud of his reaction during the pine tar game. He was always upbeat, and he let you umpire. He showed respect to everyone on the field." — **Vic Voltaggio**

Which manager gave/gives you the least grief?

➤ Tom Kelly	3
➤ Steve Boros	1
➤ Jim Leyland	1
➤ Ralph Houk	1
➤ John McNamara	1

Also receiving votes: Bobby Cox, Dave Garcia, Preston Gomez, Whitey Herzog, Dick Howser, Tony La Russa, Bob Lemon, Jack McKeon, Lefty Phillips, Chuck Tanner, Earl Weaver, Bobby Winkles, Don Zimmer.

They said it

"Ralph Houk was very professional, and every day was a new day. He never let things that happened on Saturday carry over to Sunday. I can't say that about all managers." — **Vic Voltaggio**

"Tom Kelly was very fair, would listen and also had a sense of humor." — **Dale Scott**

"Don Zimmer, Bob Lemon, Lefty Phillips ... most managers were OK." — **Bill Haller**

What's the toughest sport to officiate—baseball, basketball, football or hockey?

➤ Baseball	5
➤ Basketball	4
➤ Football	1
➤ Hockey	1
➤ They're all tough	1



Bruce Froemming

They said it
 "Your only penalty in baseball is an ejection. Basketball has technical fouls, football has flags for unsportsmanlike calls, hockey has the penalty box." — **Bruce Froemming**

"In football, the rules are always changing and the officials are overevaluated." — **Tim Tschida**

"Baseball—by far. You have an average of 150 pitches, and it's not like basketball and the rest, where the clock is running." — **Dutch Rennert**

"Anyone who likes to bash officials should work one game to see what it's like." — **Dale Scott**

— **Jeff D'Alessio**

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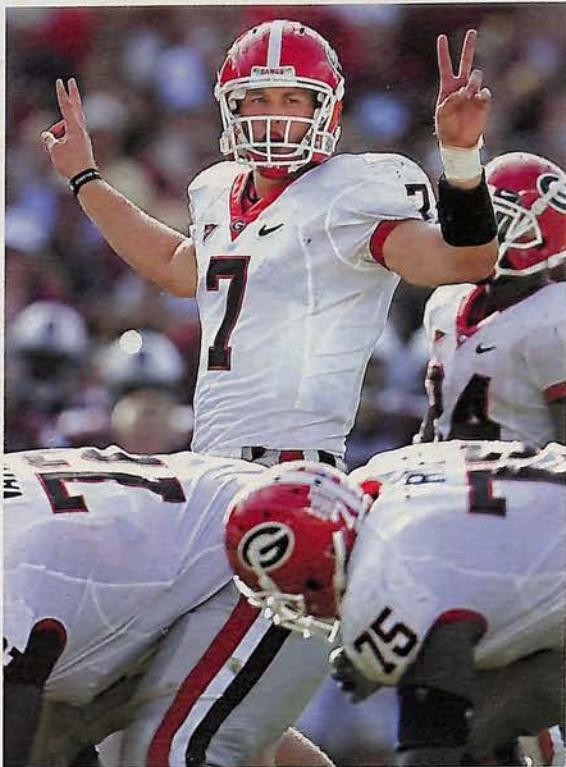
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Next Gen

NFL draft spotlight: Quarterbacks

It's not a particularly strong year for senior quarterbacks—just four of them crack SN draft expert and former NFL scout Russ Lande's top 10 QBs list. Georgia's Matthew Stafford is a candidate to be picked first overall if he leaves school early.

Player, school	Class	Projected round
1. Matthew Stafford, Georgia	Jr.	High 1st
2. Dan LeFevour, Central Michigan	Jr.	2nd
3. Tom Brandstater, Fresno State	Sr.	2nd/3rd
4. Sam Bradford, Oklahoma	Soph.	2nd/3rd
5. Nate Davis, Ball State	Jr.	3rd
6. Chase Daniel, Missouri	Sr.	3rd/4th
7. Tim Tebow, Florida	Jr.	3rd/4th
8. Colt McCoy, Texas	Jr.	4th
9. Rudy Carpenter, Arizona State	Sr.	4th
10. Chase Holbrook, New Mexico State	Sr.	4th/5th



3 QUESTIONS WITH ... South Atlanta High School C DERRICK FAVORS

Georgia Tech wants him to stay home. Georgia wants him to save its program. Memphis wants him to lead it back to the Final Four.

Derrick Favors still isn't sure what he wants as the national signing period (November 12-19) nears. Brian McLaughlin caught up with *Sporting News*' No. 1 basketball prospect in the class of 2009.

Q: What NBA player would you compare yourself to?

A: A lot of people say I'm like Dwight Howard. I can see some of that in me, and maybe a little bit of Kevin Garnett. I idolized them both a little bit. Dwight Howard's from around here. I know him but not that good. I think I'm probably like him most when it comes to explosiveness.

Q: What's the one thing that has stood out most in your recruiting visits?

A: The crowd chanted my name one time.

It was in the gym just watching an open practice at N.C. State. It surprised me a little bit. They were just saying "Derrick Favors" over and over and clapping. I just couldn't do anything but smile at that.

Q: Do you think you'll stay all four years, regardless of which school you choose?

A: Oh, I would move on. I don't plan on staying four years. But if I have to, I'll do it. The reason is a little of everything—family, being ready to play in the pros, all that.



TRAIL MIX

► So much for Arizona's top 10 class. A haul that was shaping up as one of the country's best was wiped out when Lute Olson announced he was stepping down as coach. Portland small forward Mike Moser, Los Angeles small forward Solomon Hill and Tacoma (Wash.) point guard Abdul Gaddy all backed out of their commitments.

► Still no word where the nation's consensus No. 1 backcourt player will land. Point guard John Wall of Raleigh, N.C., is considering Baylor, Kansas, Memphis, N.C. State and Oregon. Wall, who has a November 7 trip scheduled to Memphis, is unsure whether he'll sign during the early period.

► The one school whose football and basketball recruiting classes rank in *Scout.com*'s top 10? Texas—No. 2 in basketball, No. 3 in football.

THE RECRUITNIK



On Friday nights, Jheranie Boyd catches passes for Ashbrook High in Gastonia, N.C. On Saturdays, he catches winks—from coaches and fans—at the college campus he's a guest of that weekend. *Rivals.com*'s 32nd-ranked prospect has been to Illinois, Missouri, N.C. State and Oklahoma and is set to make his decision soon. The four-star wide receiver gives SN's Brian McLaughlin the highlights of his trips so far:

► **24-7, baby.** "As soon as you get to wherever you're going, somebody from the college is there to take you to the hotel, and I eat 24/7. I think I gain a pound or two every time I take a visit. You do not go home starving. I would say the best was when I was up at N.C. State. I had this big ol' steak. I ordered a small one, but they gave me a huge one, and it filled me up."

► **Academics.** "They all have academic meetings set up for me. I plan on majoring in communications and getting my degree in 3 1/2 years. Some of the schools say they have the best program, but I'd say they're probably about equal."

► **The routine.** "Depending on what time of the day the game is, you meet other recruits and some of the guys who are there on their unofficial visits. Then you eat again, whatever you want to eat. Usually, you stay in the football office until it's time to come out and watch the game. Curfew is usually by 1 a.m., but I'm always in by about 12 o'clock because I'm always so tired from all the plane travel."

► **Feeling the love.** "When I went to Oklahoma and I was sitting on the sidelines during warmups, little kids were asking for my autograph. I told them I was here from North Carolina, and I asked them how they knew who I was. But they were saying my name. I felt real welcome at Oklahoma. I felt a lot of love when I went there."

► **Last supper.** "Coach (Ron) Zook at Illinois actually had us over to his house on Sunday before we left. He had macaroni and chicken and desserts, stuff like that. There were three other guys there on their official visit as well."

For more from *The Recruitnik*—aka SN recruiting expert Brian McLaughlin—check out his daily blog at sportingnews.com.

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Will's World

Life at Never-Never U

Every program gets a shot at the NCAA Tournament; apparently some would rather pass



Will Leitch is the author of three books, including *God Save The Fan*. He is the founding editor of *Deadspin* and a contributing editor at *New York* magazine.

The college basketball season starts next week—I, for one, am counting the minutes to the thrilling Friday night opener at Assembly Hall between those feisty Eastern Washington Eagles and my beloved Illini—but, my fanaticism aside, it's mostly diehards who pay close attention to college basketball before February. This is built into the system; the NCAA Tournament, though it's four months away, affects every aspect of being a college hoops fan.

This is because anyone can make it. Last year, my Illini had a horrific season; they even lost (at home!) to Tennessee State, which has produced Oprah and little else. But on Sunday of the Big Ten Tournament, Illinois was one win from making the NCAAs, thanks to a spirited run to the final. No other sport is like this. If you are a lousy team in the NFL, baseball, college football, hockey, competitive turducken consumption, there is no Get Out Of Mediocrity Free card for you at the end. But in college basketball, everybody has a chance up to the very finish. It appeals to the dorm-room socialist in me, even when the cold-blooded grown-up I've become thinks Georgia shouldn't have even made the NIT.

What I find particularly nutty about this Everybody Plays An Inning, youth-league mentality is that, despite the NCAA's bending over backward to give everybody a chance, there are Division I schools that have never been to the tournament. In fact, there are 46, if you include the New Jersey Institute of Technology, which joined Division I in 2006-07 and went a rousing 0-29 last season. Division I has 341 teams (again, if you include NJIT). That's more than one in 10.

What's wrong with these guys?

Most gruesomely, there are five original members of Division I that have never made it: Army, The Citadel, William & Mary, St. Francis (N.Y.) and Northwestern. This is the 62nd D-I season for these teams, and they've never once sniffed the Big Dance. This would seem difficult to do even if you are trying. I mean, now, with conference tournaments, all you have to do is get hot for a week in March.

Of those five, the most fascinating are Army and Northwestern. Army can't claim a lack of quality coaches; Bob Knight and Mike Krzyzewski got their starts there. And however historically inept Northwestern might have been, this is a Big Ten school *near Chicago*, for crying out loud. Say what you will about the Cubs, but they've at least made the playoffs a few times. Northwestern hasn't won the Big Ten since 1933.

In any other sport, the crush of history would devastate a team's fans before the season started. But this is college basketball. Florida A&M went 12-18 in 1999 and made the tournament. (That was the last year Northwestern made the NIT, by the way.) So as the losses pile up over the next two months, take heed, fans of Army, and Northwestern, and William & Mary, and The Citadel. The season doesn't really start until months from now. Those losses might end up meaning nothing at all. Feel better?



This is Northwestern's Craig Moore dealing with the end of his season last March, but it could just as easily be any Northwestern player in the past 61 years.

Bold, daring predictions

1. Three months from now, after a 7-14 start, Oregon State basketball coach (and brother-in-law of Barack Obama) Craig Robinson will sing a very different tune about how much a change is needed.

2. After a 56-11 loss to the Cowboys, Mike Singletary will kill somebody. Seriously. I love the '85 Bears as much as anyone, but come on, man, settle down. Interim coaches don't get to explode like that after one game. Though he might just be auditioning for a Miller Lite commercial somewhere down the line.



This Mike may have learned a few things about how to blow his top from Iron Mike Ditka back in '85.

3. Following hours of soul searching after looking at my column photo—including what my father calls the Leitch family "Howdy Doody cheeks"—I will take enough diet pills to kill a horse, leading to a suspension from *SN* after Chris Mortensen breaks the story. I will get depressed and overeat. You will e-mail me at will@deadspin.com to make me feel better, or at least give me an excuse to drop the Ho Hos.

People of the Fortnight

Tyrone Willingham. In 2002, Willingham was named Sportsman of the Year by this magazine. He was a shining example of a coach who did things the right way at one of the premier programs in the country, Notre Dame. Since then, his teams have gone 22-45, and he has been fired once and "resigned" once. The mag's SOY picks since Willingham: Tom Brady (twice), Dick Vermeil/Jack McKeon, LaDainian Tomlinson and Matt Leinart. You can find only one of those men in action right now. Note to editors: This year, please pick Terrell Owens.



Bud Selig. I love baseball more than I love just about anything else, but if Game 5 (Part 2) of the World Series is any indication, then I think we need to make all postseason games three innings. You can really pack in a lot in three innings. And when your team wins the World Series after those three innings, you have time to joyously freak out, set some cars on fire and still be in bed by midnight. This is postseason baseball at its best. How about it, Bud?

HONDA KICKS



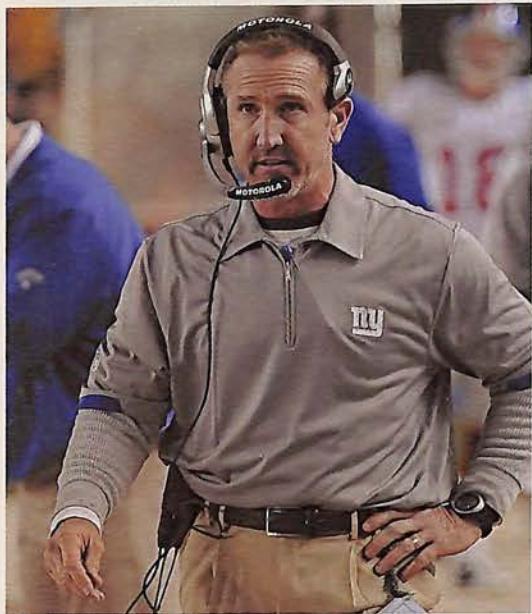
The Honda Ridgeline has been kicking up more than just dust lately. With driver Gavin Skilton at the helm, the truck took 1st at both the Primm 300 and the Silver State 300. Navigating rough and rocky terrain in both races, the Ridgeline charged its way to the front of the pack and left the competition coughing.

honda.com 1-800-33-Honda Specially constructed race vehicle not available for sale. For closed-course competition only. 2008 model shown. ©2008 American Honda Motor Co., Inc.

THE RIDGELINE



What We're Watching



Spagnuolo has learned well from his mentor.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

ALABAMA AT LSU

Saturday, November 8, 3:30 p.m. ET (CBS)

Nick Saban's former team, the reigning national champion Tigers, looks like the Crimson Tide's last major hurdle in getting to this year's BCS title game. If Alabama survives Death Valley, Tide safety Rashad Johnson likes its chances: "If we continue to do what we do and can go undefeated in the SEC and win an SEC title, it would be hard to keep us from playing in the big game."

NFL

GIANTS AT EAGLES

Sunday, November 9, 8:15 p.m. ET (NBC)

This is the first of two key second half meetings for the NFC East rivals, and according to our War Room scouts, some of the best dueling will be on the sidelines. Jim Johnson, Philadelphia's defensive coordinator, and his protege, New York's Steve Spagnuolo, both know how to bring pressure with or without blitzing. "The battle of the defensive masterminds will be fun to watch in this one," one scout says.

NASCAR

FORD 400 AT HOMESTEAD-MIAMI SPEEDWAY

Sunday, November 16, 3 p.m. ET (ABC)

Jimmie Johnson has never won the race at Homestead, but he still has managed to finish first there twice. Miami marks the final race in the Chase, and the two-time Cup champion is on the verge of a three-peat, something last done by Dale Yarborough 30 years ago. "I understand that I was Jimmie's hero when he was growing up," Yarborough says. "He's the kind of driver that likes to run up front. That's the way I drove."

— Vinnie Iyer

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5 QUESTIONS ... for Dwight Howard

Dwight Howard is a high school Naismith award winner, a No. 1 NBA draft pick, a two-time NBA All-Star and a slam dunk champion. Oh, and over the summer, he added an Olympic gold medal to his trophy case. Not bad for a 22-year-old.

In his four NBA seasons with the Orlando Magic, Howard has led the NBA in total rebounds the past three years and entered the season averaging a career double double, 16.5 points and 12.2 rebounds, while shooting 56.7 percent. The 6-11 big man from Southwest Atlanta Christian Academy—who has yet to miss a regular-season game—has led the Magic to the playoffs the past two years. Hours before starting his fifth season, Howard answered some questions from *Sporting News* readers.

Q: What is the best part about your life as a basketball star, with plenty of money and an Olympic gold medal?

Taylor Shain, Elon, N.C.

Howard: The best part about my life is being able to share it with people that I love the most—my friends, my family, my son. I've got friends and family at every game.

Q: How much will it help you and the team to have Tony Battie back this season? Can Marcin Gortat be a consistent factor in the paint for the Magic?

Sandy Krebs, Indialantic, Fla.

Howard: It will help, if Tony can stay healthy, which I think he will this year. Marcin will be a factor (for us), we just have to make sure we stay on him and keep his head right. He's going to help our team get to the next level.

Q: At what age did you know you would play in the NBA? What made you think you could do it?

Andy Michel, Washougal, Wash.

Howard: When I was 10, I felt like I could play with older, bigger people and survive, and that just made me push myself to get better. No, it wasn't tough (dealing with the pressure of being a high school star). I didn't think about it. I was just playing basketball and enjoying my senior year—my last year of being a youth.

Q: I remember when you came straight out of high school into the NBA, you talked about the struggles you might have facing the lifestyle of an NBA player as a born-again Christian. Can you share a little about what life has been like for you?

Joe Gough, Philadelphia

Howard: It has been going smooth. Faith is always first, then family, then basketball. I always try to keep my priorities in line: my morals, what I stand for and what I believe in.

Q: Who's the strongest big man you've played against in the NBA?

Ted Kim, Los Angeles

Howard: Carlos Boozer. I learned how to finish stronger by playing against him. He's more physical in games than he is in practice. During the Olympics, I hung out with Chris Bosh and Carlos Boozer the most. We talked every day off the court. We were always together, learning from each other. Basketball, personal—just being around those guys—we developed a relationship that is going to last a lifetime.

—Ken Bradley

YOUR TURN In each issue, we'll give readers the reporter's notebook and have them ask questions of a big-name sports personality. Look for future guests in *Sporting News Today*.



HOWARD: BOB LEVERONE/SN

FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS TO VICTORY LANE. CHASING THE DREAM, THEN AND NOW.



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Friday Nov 7th 3:30PMET

NASCAR Trackside Live

Friday Nov 7th 10:30PMET

NASCAR Performance

Saturday Nov 8th 2:00PMET

NASCAR Tradin' Paint

Saturday Nov 8th 2:00PMET

NASCAR In a Hurry

Sunday Nov 9th 12:30PMET

NASCAR RaceDay

Sunday Nov 9th 1:00PMET

NASCAR Victory Lane

Sunday Nov 9th 8:00PMET

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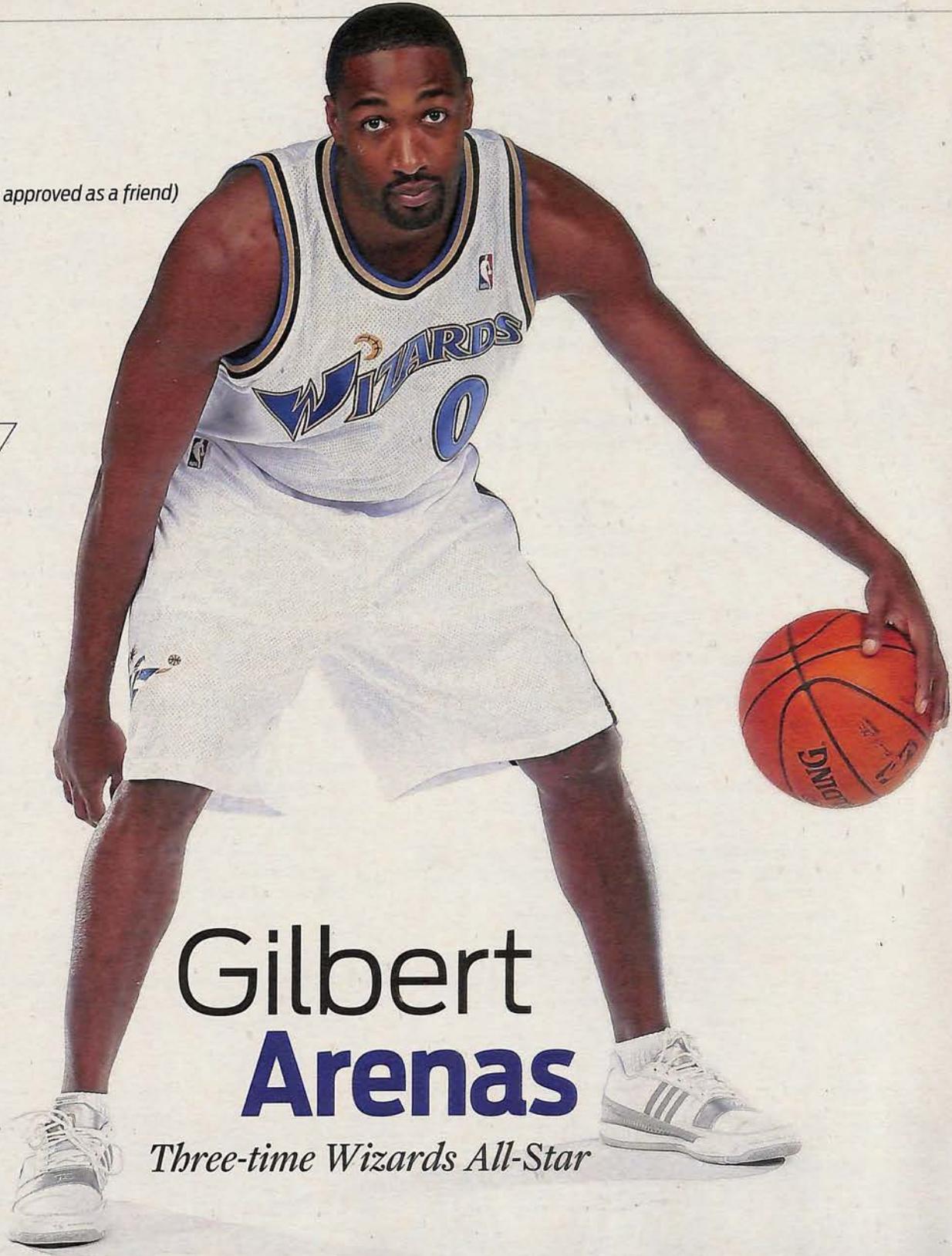
My Profile

(What you won't find on Facebook ... even if you are approved as a friend)

- » **Born:** January 6, 1982, in Los Angeles
- » **Status:** Engaged
- » **Alma mater:** Arizona
- » **What's on TV:** *Martin, 24, Everybody Loves Raymond, Married with Children*
- » **What's in my iPod:** Jay-Z, Lil Wayne, Beyoncé, Alicia Keys, Kanye West, Chris Brown
- » **Favorite flicks:** *The Usual Suspects, A Few Good Men* and anything starring Denzel Washington
- » **What I'm reading:** *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*, by Robert Kiyosaki
- » **Magazine subscription:** *duPont Registry*
- » **Bookmarks:** nba.com, google.com, bungie.net
- » **Worst habit:** I have to take five showers a day.
- » **Superstition:** I have to throw my jersey in the crowd after every game.
- » **Love to trade places for a day with ...** Martin Luther King Jr. I would love for him to see what the world has become since he died.
- » **First job:** Rock climbing instructor at (Universal) Citywalk in Los Angeles. I was 14 years old and was paid \$5 an hour. I weighed 160 pounds then, and I was attached to a guy who weighed 240 pounds. We were attached by a rope—when he came down, I went up.
- » **For dinner:** Sea bass, brown rice, spinach and S & S Cheesecake
- » **Talent I'd most like to have:** The ability to read people's minds
- » **Favorite athlete to watch in another sport:** Jericho Scott (the Connecticut 9-year-old who was deemed too good to pitch against kids his age)
- » **Dream date:** A double date—my son and I and my fiancee and my daughter
- » **Favorite city to visit:** Manila, Philippines
- » **Favorite teams growing up:** Los Angeles Lakers and Orlando Magic
- » **Favorite physical attribute about myself:** My smile
- » **Favorite value in others:** Honesty
- » **My greatest love:** Basketball
- » **My hero:** Anyone who is doing something positive with their lives
- » **My bucket list:** 1. Travel the world, 2. Spend one night in the White House, 3. Win a championship, 4. See my jersey retired, 5. Co-star in a romance movie with Halle Berry.
- » **My motto:** The man who sleeps on the floor cannot fall out of bed.

—Jeff D'Alessio

YOUR TURN Got someone you'd like us to go after? E-mail Jeff D'Alessio at jdalessio@sportingnews.com



Gilbert Arenas

Three-time Wizards All-Star

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What you're missing

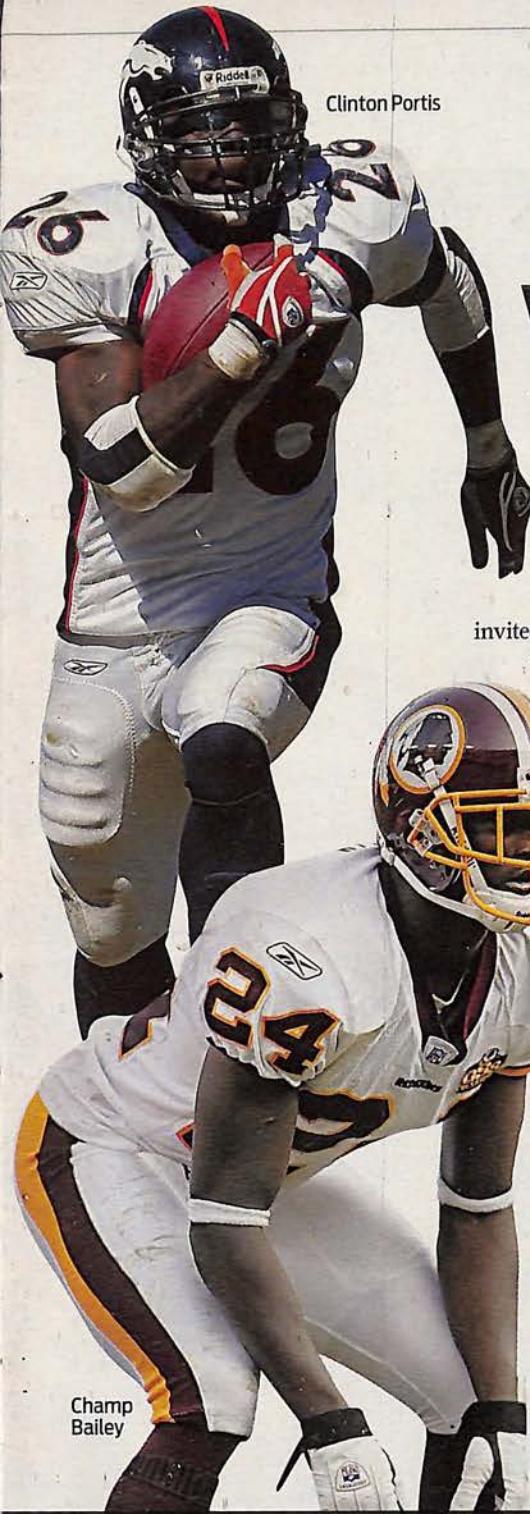
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Greg Jennings
Packers wide receiver
What's on TV: *Sanford and Son* is my all-time favorite. My wife makes me watch *Army Wives* with her, too.



Ron Gardenhire
Twins manager
Dream date: Olivia Newton-John, from the movie *Grease*, in her leather outfit



Clinton Portis

What were they thinking?

The Bailey-Portis trade wasn't a run-of-the-mill NFL deal, but it turned out to be a win-win

At the end of the 2003 season, Broncos running back Clinton Portis was invited to the Pro Bowl for the first time and Redskins cornerback Champ Bailey was headed to his fourth consecutive one.

They were both on top of their games. Portis, a second-year back out of Miami, had rushed for 1,591 yards that year. Bailey was one of the league's best—if not *the* best—cornerback men.

Then, in a very un-NFL-like move, the two stars were dealt for each other.

Five years later, three of the key players in the deal—Redskins executive VP of football operations Vinny Cerrato, then-Broncos G.M. Ted Sundquist and Bailey's agent, Jack Reale—talked to *Sporting News* about how it went down.

Sundquist: "Jack Reale approached me at the Senior Bowl the year prior to the trade and said that Champ was having issues with some things in Washington and as he looked

around the league, one of the places that he would like to play was out in Denver."

Reale: "It came about as a result of a negotiation impasse on a new contract for Champ in Washington. It was purely contractual."

Sundquist: "At the Super Bowl, the Redskins and the Broncos were paired up in a suite, and my wife and I would go to the Super Bowl every year and the Snyders would be in the suite. (Redskins owner) Dan (Snyder) was primed to talk about trading for Clinton Portis."

Cerrato: "It was not difficult to make it happen. Everything happened very quickly at the Scouting Combine in Indianapolis. Joe Gibbs and his offensive staff watched film on Portis and loved what they saw, and we finished the deal at the Combine."

Sundquist: "I think (Denver coach) Mike (Shanahan) felt like in order to get a guy like Champ, we're willing to give a guy like Clinton Portis. Because of the success we had at the running back position, we could find another Clinton Portis—where we had not been able to find a Champ Bailey."

Reale: "It's just the nature of pro sports now. Transitions are the rule, rather than exception. There were no glitches with that, and obviously it's gone well."

—Ken Bradley

Champ Bailey

MONEY TALK Alex Rodriguez's \$275 million contract is in no jeopardy of being surpassed this hot stove season. With some baseball teams feeling the same pinch as Joe the Plumber, contracts might not be as lucrative as in years past. Four G.M.s gave *Sporting News* their takes on how the offseason might play out.



J.P. Ricciardi

Blue Jays
"I do think the economy will affect the game; I know that it

will affect us. We will have to be very judicious in how we spend and on whom we spend. I see the game being no different than life; everyone is going to be hit by the economy."



Lee Pelekoudas

Mariners

"In general, I think the economy will have a telling effect on the game across the board; at least it should. However, it may not impact us greatly, as our participation in

this year's market may be limited anyway. Or it may not; that's to be determined. Although everyone will probably be affected, it's likely the lower-level and midlevel free agents will be impacted more than the big-name free agents. That's been the case in the past and should probably hold true this time around."



Josh Byrnes

Diamondbacks

"I do think the economy will have an impact on the offseason

market. Teams projecting revenue and setting budgets are probably inclined to be somewhat cautious based on the economic conditions."



Mark Shapiro

Indians

"There will clearly be a group of teams that feel no effect and can compete for the premium talent at the top of the market due to new revenue sources—ballparks—

big market size or recent levels of success. There are also others without these revenue boosts or revenue streams that will feel some fallout from our nation's economic challenges and that may affect the mid- and lower levels of the free-agent market."

—Jeff D'Alessio

STREET & SMITH'S
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REPORT

• The BCS has started exclusive negotiations with FOX, and it's seeking as much as a 60 percent increase in its rights fee, according to media and college sources. That would have the network paying an average of \$132 million a year to keep the rights to its four BCS bowl games.

• The NBA began the season with a leaguewide full-season-ticket sales average of 8,500, which is even with last year, but the league's average renewal rate was 80 percent compared with 84 percent last year.

• This year's World Series, as expected, finished as the lowest-rated and least-viewed Fall Classic of all time. Philadelphia's five-game win over Tampa Bay scored an average 8.4 rating and 13.6 million viewers on FOX, falling below the marks of 10.1 and 15.8 million viewers for the 2006 St. Louis-Detroit series, previously the worst World Series figures.

• The new Meadowlands stadium will have tailgating space reserved for Jets and Giants fans traveling to games by train. New Meadowlands Stadium Co., the Jets' and Giants' joint venture developing the \$1.7 billion stadium, plans to sell 100 spots in Budweiser's branded area outside the building in a program tied to the new Secaucus Junction rail line opening next summer.

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OUT TO WIN



After falling short last year, the Phillies were determined to make the most of this postseason opportunity. But now that Philadelphia has its elusive championship, what does the future hold?





The Phillies used the memory of last season's playoff collapse as motivation to make sure they were the last team standing in 2008.

PHILLIES: JULIE JACOBSON/AP

Jimmy Rollins was asked in early August what he remembered most about his first career postseason games in October 2007. "I don't know," the Phillies shortstop replied. "Only got to play in three of them."

The answer might have seemed glib if not for the look of steely determination in Rollins' eyes, a look that said *That's not happening again*. And it didn't. The Phillies charged past the Mets in the N.L. East (again) with a 17-8 September rush and then blitzed past the Brewers in the NLDS, helping to erase the memory of being swept out of the playoffs by Colorado last season. Then the Dodgers didn't pose much of a problem in a five-game NLCS.

In the World Series, with their combination of stellar pitching and just enough clutch hitting, the Phillies claimed the franchise's second world championship, the first since 1980. "We came through when it counted most," Rollins says. "That's what we've done all year."

"When I saw the last out, you know, I kind of looked up and I was kind of watching the fans and I was watching our players and I knew it was over," Phillies manager Charlie Manuel said after Game 5. "And I said, 'You know what? We just won the World Series. Like, we're champions.' I kind of laughed. I took it all in."

Manuel could have the opportunity to take it all in again next October. The Phillies have only two key free agents (left fielder Pat Burrell and starting pitcher Jamie Moyer), and the core of the team—Rollins, ace Cole Hamels, closer Brad Lidge, second baseman Chase Utley and first baseman Ryan Howard—will be around for at least a couple more years.

Lest Phillies fans have plans for the World Series trophy to become as much of a Philadelphia fixture as the Liberty Bell or Rocky statue, though, a few words of caution are necessary.

Since 1983—when the Phillies lost to the Orioles in the World Series—only one National League team has won multiple world championships. The Marlins won in 1997 and 2003, and they'll be one of the N.L. East teams trying to keep Philadelphia from repeating. Ditto for the Mets, who figure to improve via free agency. Not to mention the Cubs, Dodgers and Brewers, all of whom made the postseason in 2008 and experienced the disappointment that stuck with Rollins after the 2007 playoffs.

For the next 12 months or so, though, these Phillies can revel in the fact that they ended the franchise's 28-year title drought and quenched the city's 25-year thirst for a major professional championship.

—Ryan Fagan

THE CHARACTERS WHO WROTE THE WORLD SERIES SCRIPT

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Phillies



BRAD LIDGE

A picture of perfection, finally

Brad Lidge did not punch his questioner. He did not utter a profanity. He did not even roll his eyes.

No one would have blamed him if he had, though. Lidge just had saved Game 1 of the 2008 World Series when, for roughly the millionth time, a reporter asked about his postseason failures in 2005. That's right. After dominating the heart of the Rays' order (Carlos Pena, Evan Longoria and Carl Crawford) to protect a 3-2 lead, Lidge was talking about two pitches he threw three years ago—the 3-run homer he allowed in Game 5 of the NLCS to the Cardinals' Albert Pujols and the solo shot he served up to the White Sox's Scott Podsednik in Game 2 of the World Series.

Always the pro, Lidge answered, "It had been a real good run for me in the playoffs for a couple of years, and it ended on a sour note. That made me very hungry to get back in the postseason."

Consider him stuffed with success. With a save in the clinching game of this World Series, Lidge completed one of the best-ever seasons for a closer. He went 41-for-41 in save chances with

a 1.95 ERA in the regular season and was even better in the postseason. He remained perfect by saving seven of the Phillies' 11 victories, while allowing only one run in 9½ innings. Heading into 2009, the Phillies are set with Lidge, 31, signed for three more years while the N.L. East rival Mets could be without closer Billy Wagner (elbow) all of next season.

Lidge came to Philadelphia last offseason from the Astros, who had lost confidence in him. The day the deal was made, Lidge said manager Charlie Manuel told him, "You're our guy. You're our closer, and we're going to treat you like that."

Buoyed by the club's confidence in him and a tweaked approach to his slider—a knee injury in spring training forced him to focus on command rather than velocity—Lidge enjoyed his most memorable season.

And, hopefully, ended all questions about 2005.

—Stan McNeal

CLOSING PERFORMANCES

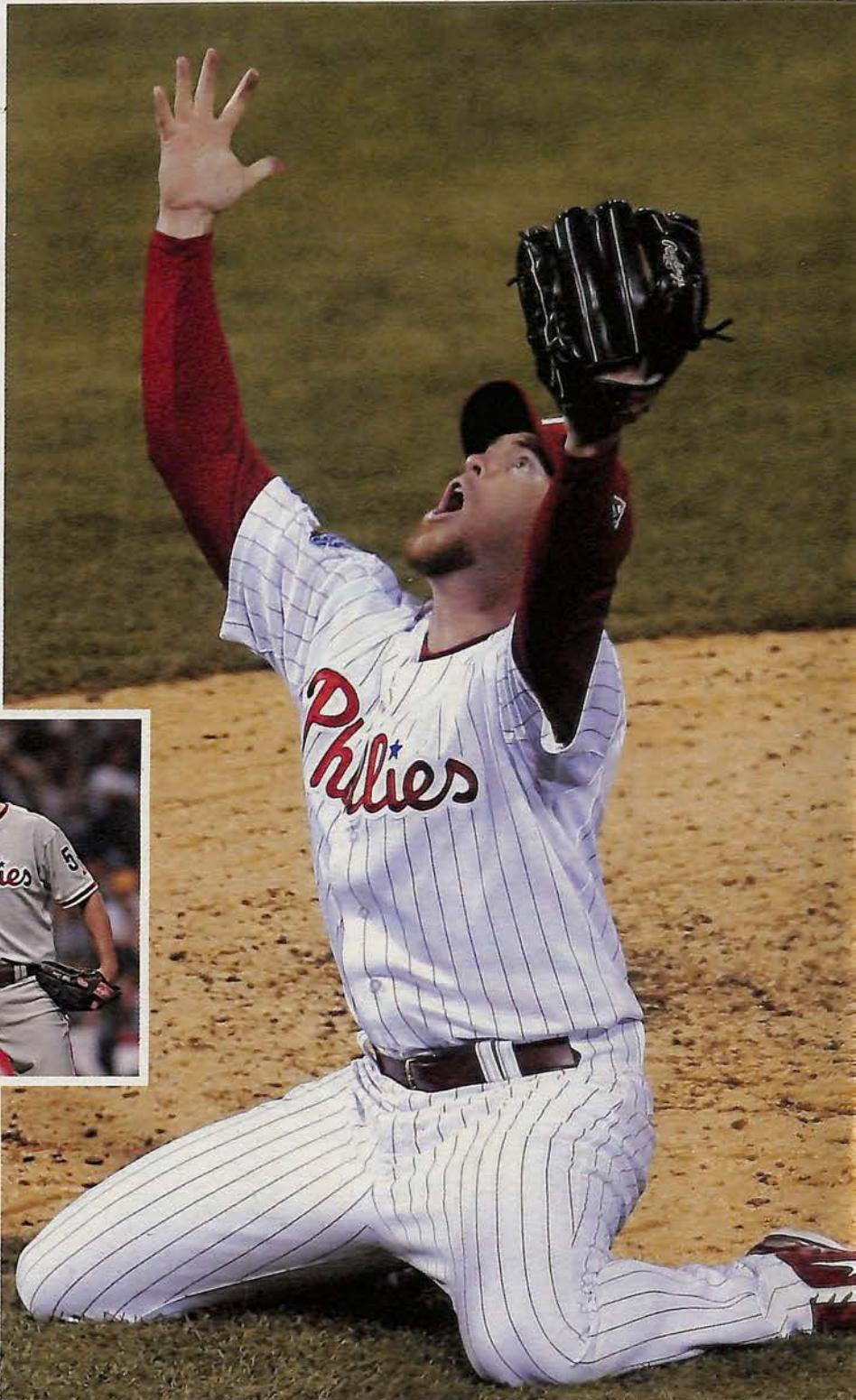
Brad Lidge's performance this October secured his spot among the elite closers in the wild-card era (1995 to present). His career postseason numbers compare favorably with those of the Yankees' Mariano Rivera and the Red Sox's Jonathan Papelbon, both of whom are known for their dominance in the playoffs.

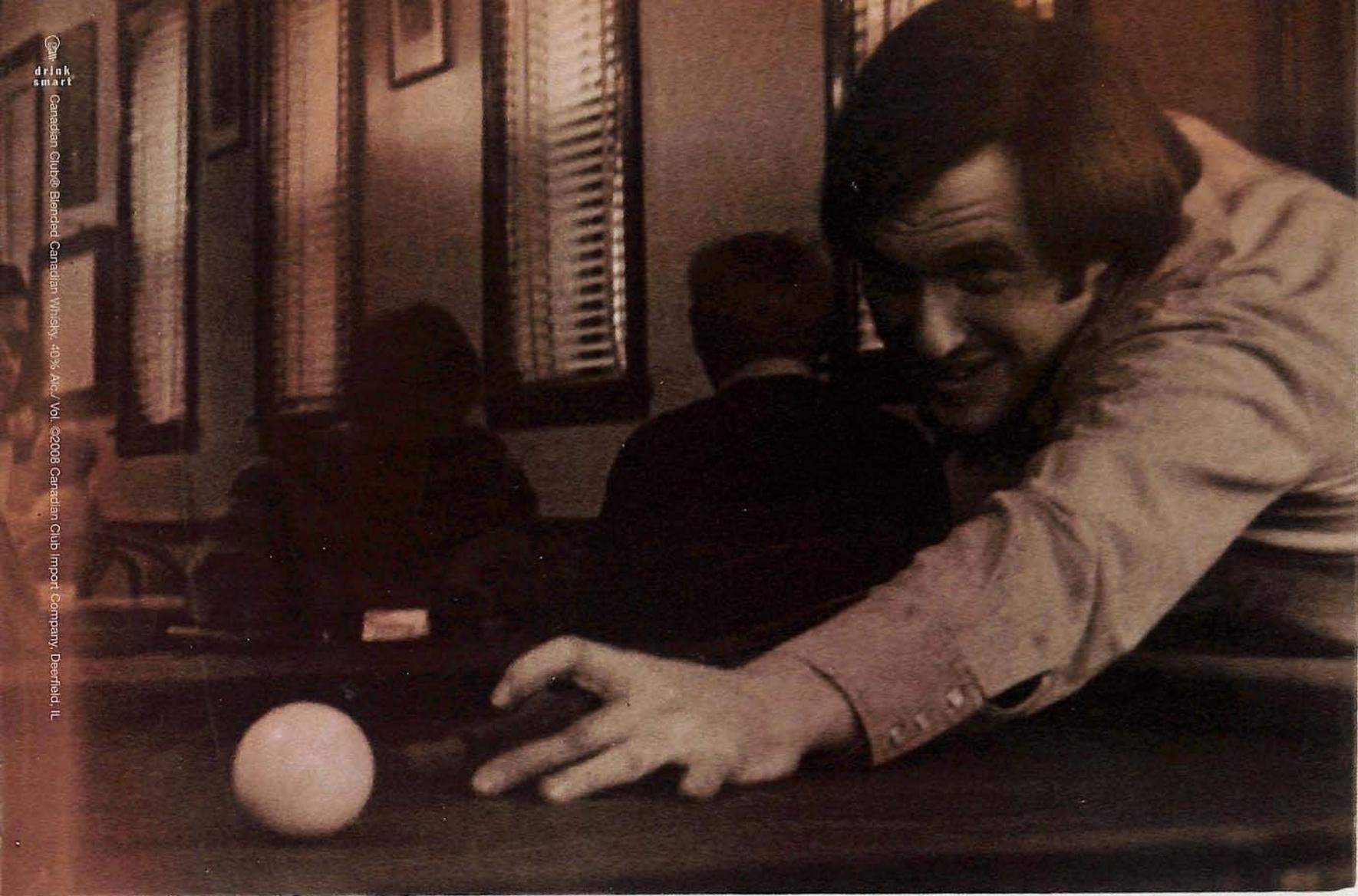
CATEGORY	LIDGE	LEADER
Saves	13 (second)	Mariano Rivera (34)
Save percentage	.867 (fifth)	John Wetteland (100.0)
ERA	2.10 (third)	Jonathan Papelbon (0.00)
Innings	34 ½	Mariano Rivera (117 ½)
Batting average allowed	.189 (fifth)	Jonathan Papelbon (.120)
Strikeouts (per nine innings)	13.4 (first)	Brad Lidge (13.4)

Minimum 10 appearances, from 1995-2008

—Stan McNeal

Lidge saved seven games and allowed only one earned run in the 2008 playoffs.





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Canadian Club.

Howard is more about winning than posting big numbers, but that doesn't stop him from doing the latter.



RYAN HOWARD

First baseman, slugger, team carrier

Ryan Howard is a mountain of a man, but you couldn't see much more than the top of his Phillies cap, set just a bit cockeyed on top of his head. He was surrounded by a swarming media amoeba that was 100 or so members strong, many with their camera-holding arms outstretched, filming away as the slugger stood near the pitcher's mound after the long-awaited conclusion to Game 5 of the World Series.

What you could see clearly was the World Series trophy—the golden symbol of baseball's ultimate accomplishment—that Howard was raising for the fans at Citizens Bank Park. If 5-8 shortstop Jimmy Rollins had been holding that trophy, it might not have been visible. But with the 6-4 Howard lifting it skyward, it seemed visible to all of Philadelphia.

The trophy isn't the only heavy lifting Howard did this season.

"A carrier is somebody that can take your team and get the big hits and knock in runs, and he can put you on his back and he can carry you," Phillies manager Charlie Manuel says of Howard, who should cash in this offseason, his second of being arbitration-

eligible. "And that's one of my favorite statements. And Howard, he's a carrier."

Despite his "struggles" in the postseason—Howard didn't hit a home run in the first two rounds—the Rays pitched carefully to him in the World Series. For the first handful of at-bats, it worked; Howard went 2-for-9 with four strikeouts in the first two games. If he was frustrated with his lack of postseason power, though, he didn't show it. "We were winning," Howard says. "When you get to the playoffs, it's not about individual goals or individual stats and stuff like that. It's a team effort.... I don't care if I had hit a home run the entire thing. I don't care if I went 0-for-4 or 0-for-the entire postseason."

Howard, of course, did better than that. In the fourth inning of Game 4, he delivered arguably the biggest hit of the postseason. His 3-run homer broke open a tight game, lifting the Phillies to an eventual 10-2 victory. And his three homers in the five-game series were just one fewer than the Rays hit as a team.

See? Carrier.

—Ryan Fagan



IT TAKES A LOT OF WORK TO LOOK THIS GOOD

The lasting memory of Ryan Howard's 2008 season will be either his 2-homer, 5-RBI effort in Game 4 of the World Series or the show he put on during the Phillies' pennant push in September (they went 17-8 in the regular season's final month). He finished the regular season with the most homers (48) and RBIs (146) in the majors, but it's not as easy as the Phillies' slugger made it look. He puts in a lot of extra time to stay consistent.

"People don't see the work that Ryan Howard puts in," teammate Jimmy Rollins says. "He's in the cage, sometimes he does his one-hand drill, sometimes he's hitting off the tee, other times hitting off the machine, and that's trying to find a consistent stroke. And that's not for power—he's just trying to find the stroke that keeps his bat in the zone."

Being consistent is a challenge, even for a former N.L. MVP who is a top candidate for the award again this season. Howard's month-by-month splits, from opening day through the World Series:

MONTH	AT-BATS	HR	RBIs	AVERAGE	OPS
March/April	99	5	12	.172	.640
May	105	10	30	.238	.934
June	107	5	26	.234	.726
July	103	10	27	.311	.978
August	108	7	19	.213	.791
September	88	11	32	.352	1.274
October	52	3	9	.269	.897

—Ryan Fagan

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JAMIE MOYER

An oldie and a goody

It makes sense to talk about pitching at 50 when you win 16 games and have the chance to dig up the pitching rubber at 44.



As sure as a championship banner will be raised at Citizens Bank Park, lefthander Jamie Moyer, a free agent, will pitch next season. Heck, Moyer, who will turn 46 on November 18, might pitch until he's 50.

"I'm not there yet," he says. "Five years is a long ways away. But if you asked me at 40 if I thought I'd be playing at 45, I'd probably say no. So we'll see where it goes."

Where Moyer has been lately few his age have gone. He became the second-oldest pitcher to work a World Series game when he held the Rays to three earned runs in 6½ innings in Game 3. At an age when his contemporaries were watching on TV, Moyer was frustrating hitters barely half his age. Not only that, he was fielding a drag bunt and making a midair flip toss to first base.

If Moyer was concerned about his two losses—the Phillies' only two losses—in the previous two rounds of the postseason, he did not admit it. "The difference was probably just creating a tempo," he said after the Phillies' 5-4 victory over Tampa Bay in Game 3.

Moyer's season proved he has figured out

how to get older without aging. He—not NLCS and World Series MVP Cole Hamels—won a team-high 16 games, lost only seven times and posted a 3.71 ERA (his lowest since 2003) in the regular season. Since turning 35, Moyer is 157-101, compared with 89-84 in his first 11 seasons. Pre-35, Moyer was released four times and had seven seasons with an ERA of at least 4.50.

Post-35, he has won 20 games twice and has had only three seasons with a 4.50 ERA or higher.

Better conditioning and fewer ailments were keys in 2008. "I don't think he took any anti-inflammatories all year," Phillies G.M. Pat Gillick says.

As for his post-35 success, Moyer points to his careerlong need to rely on control and craftiness. Because he has never thrown faster than 85 mph, he has never had to adjust from power to finesse.

Given the way he's still throwing, Moyer won't have to worry about adjusting from active to retired until, perhaps, he's 50.

Or older.

—Stan McNeal

NOT EVERYONE AGES GRACEFULLY

At 46, Jeff Montgomery and Mark Gubicza still bring the heat. Just ask the youth team to which Montgomery throws batting practice. Or Gubicza's son, who enjoys a game of catch with dad in the back yard.

Montgomery threw his last major league pitch nine years ago. For Gubicza, it has been 11 years. Neither can imagine pitching for real at his age, let alone in a World Series, as Jamie Moyer just did.

"My body feels good, but my arm still barks every day," says Gubicza, a Pennsylvania American Legion All-Star teammate of Moyer's in 1980.

When the soon-to-be-46-year-old Moyer broke into the majors with the Cubs in 1986, *Top Gun* was playing on the big screen, gas cost 93 cents a gallon and a slender slugger named Barry Bonds was going deep for the first time.

"The remarkable part to me is that he is able to make it through a long season without his body breaking down," says Montgomery, who might have had more than 304 saves were it not for hip tendinitis late in his career.

"I've probably had more surgeries than Jamie's had innings," says former All-Star closer Jeff Brantley, another Moyer fan. Brantley, 45, has been out of the game since 2001. "When I get up in the morning now," he says, "the only thing I want to do is fall down."

Even the 40-something ex-hitters are awed by Digger Phelps' son-in-law, who replaced Dazzy Vance as the oldest player to debut in the World Series.

"He was throwing 83 to 85 (mph) when I was facing him," says former infielder Tracy Woodson, 46 and retired for 15 years. "I was facing Nolan Ryan when he was throwing 90-whatever and he was at the end of his career. He had good enough stuff to get guys out that you could say, 'Man, this guy can still blow it by somebody.' Jamie, gosh, he's never been able to blow it by anybody."

—Jeff D'Alessio



CHARLIE MANUEL

One ring heavier, still the same guy

Don't expect Charlie Manuel to change just because he won the World Series. After managing the Phillies to their first championship in 28 years, he could have pointed to the fans and asked, "So you think I'm nothing but a country bumpkin now?"

Instead, Manuel shouted, as he rarely does, "This is for Philadelphia! This is for our fans!"

Same old Charlie, a 64-year-old baseball lifer who is as adept at deflecting attention as calling on the correct pinch hitter.

"A really good baseball man, a really good guy," says Ed Wade, the former Phillies general manager who hired Manuel. "After how he was received and how he was treated, this is great vindication for him."

Manuel beat out a crowded field that included Jim Leyland when he was hired to manage Philadelphia after the 2004 season. After four years of tiptoeing around the combustible Larry Bowa, the Phillies needed a manager who would have his players' backs. "We felt we had the type of players who would feed off Charlie," Wade says.

One problem: Manuel, true to his country roots, didn't go over well

in a city that prides itself on savvy and toughness. The Phillies' playoff drought—11 seasons when he was hired—didn't make them the most patient lot, either. "Charlie went through some very tough times, and it wasn't fair because a lot of those people should have known better," Wade says.

The Phillies have won at least 85 games in each of Manuel's four seasons but didn't make the playoffs until last year, when they were swept in the first round by Colorado. They added closer Brad Lidge last offseason to shore up a major weakness—their 4.41 bullpen ERA was 24th in the majors in 2007—and peaked at the right time this season, going 17-8 in September and 11-3 in the playoffs.

As he did after the previous two playoff rounds, Manuel hung out in his office while the Phillies celebrated their World Series title. That doesn't mean there wasn't a great deal of satisfaction. "In baseball, when someone asks me what I want to be known as, I want to be known as a winner," he said. "Once you win a World Series, you become a winner."

Just don't plan on seeing him gloat.

—Stan McNeal

OH, CHARLIE

From the Saint Joseph's basketball office to the Flyers' practice rink, Charlie Manuel's steady hand has been the talk of the sports town in Philadelphia. "He has built a team that shows up and works every day despite the previous day's results. They seem to enjoy what they are doing," says Saint Joe's coach Phil Martelli, one of many Philly sports leaders who hopes to model his season after Manuel's. Some others:

◆ **Andy Reid** ▶ **Eagles coach** and Manuel's text-message buddy

"Probably the thing that has impressed me the most about Charlie is his consistency with the players. It looks like he's very demanding, and it's almost the more demanding he is, the more they respect him. It looks like they play so hard for him and really care about him as a human being."

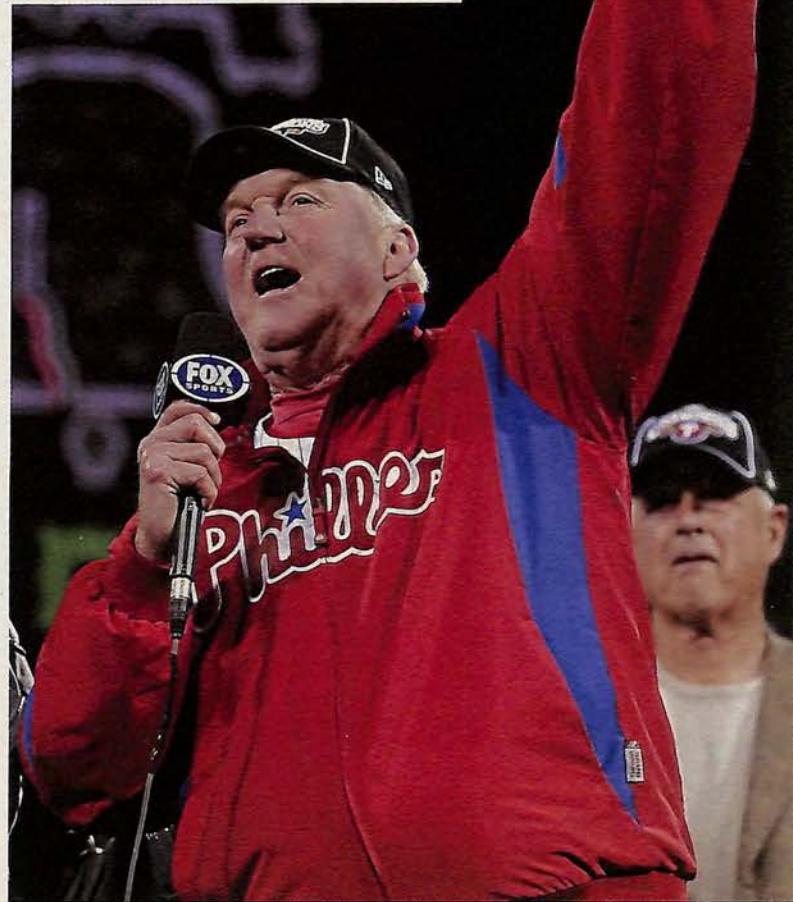
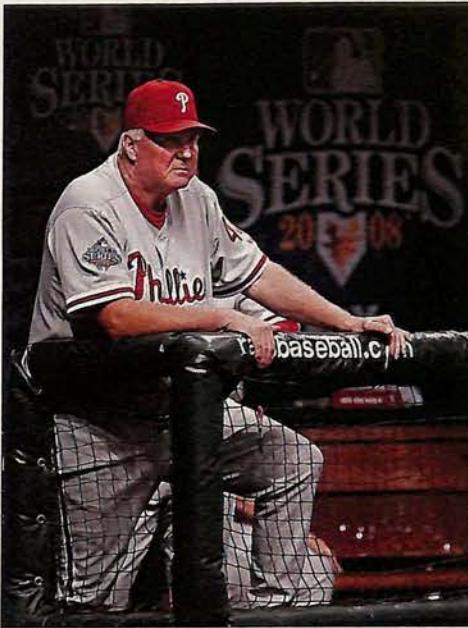
◆ **John Stevens** ▶ **Flyers coach**

"Charlie was criticized early on when he took over, and the thing that impressed me the most was that he didn't let it faze him. He knows baseball, he stuck with the things he believed in, and I see a team now that plays hard for their manager. I see a guy who cares about his team. He stuck to his guns, which is an admirable quality to have."

◆ **Mo Cheeks** ▶ **76ers coach**

"Ryan Howard wasn't hitting like he normally hits, (but Manuel) stuck with his guys. He didn't get down on them, he showed a lot of confidence in his players and that has allowed his players to perform the way they have performed as of late. That's the mark of a good coach."

—Jeff D'Alessio



Manuel didn't get the best welcome from Philadelphia fans, but they like him just fine now.



DAVID PRICE

The kid rocks

A glimpse, really, is all we saw of Rays lefthander David Price this October.

With one jaw-dropping, spine-tingling appearance—his 4-out save in Game 7 of the ALCS against the Red Sox—Price let the rest of baseball in on a secret the Rays were already privy to: *This kid is really, really good.* “All I know is that the A.L. East had better be ready,” Rays veteran DH Cliff Floyd says. “He’s got ice in his veins. He makes it look easy.”

And Price made it look easy on the game’s biggest stage, against the best teams in the sport. And the shocking thing is that he isn’t a reliever. The first relief appearance of his professional career came in his major league debut (5½ innings of 2-run ball with four strikeouts) at Yankee Stadium this September. Price is a starter, a horse of a pitcher with a full arsenal, including a fastball that just won’t quit.

The reaction from Price’s teammates after that Game 7 performance—he struck out Boston’s J.D. Drew with the bases loaded and two outs in the eighth inning to protect Tampa Bay’s 3-1 lead—was classic. It was almost as if there were a collective team thought: *OK, now we can finally talk about how good this guy really is.* Before that game, that kind of talk might

have seemed crazy. But after Price shut down the defending World Series champions in the biggest moment in Rays franchise history, it didn’t sound crazy at all.

Count his teammates among the impressed:

- ◆ Rays reliever Dan Wheeler: “He went out there, and it looked like he was pitching a bullpen. These are major league hitters out there, and that lineup ... just, wow.”
- ◆ Rays third baseman Evan Longoria: “I told (shortstop Jason) Bartlett I loved the decision. I loved bringing him in against J.D. Drew, and I loved keeping him in for the ninth.”

Price had a memorable postseason debut as a reliever—he also fanned three Phillies in 3½ innings in the World Series—but chances are the only time he will pitch the ninth inning next season will be after he pitches the first eight innings, too.

“These are big league hitters, and that’s going to give me good momentum going into next year, good confidence,” Price says. “I’m coming into next year hoping to start, and if I get that nod, that’ll be awesome.”

And *awesome* will be an adjective you hear connected with Price often, next year and beyond.

— Ryan Fagan

SIX DIVIDED BY FIVE

David Price is a 6-6 lefty with a devastating slider, a developing changeup and a fastball that still hits 96 mph deep into the game. There’s no doubt his future is in the Rays’ rotation. Manager Joe Maddon has admitted as much, but how do they make room for him? Tampa Bay’s rotation was the backbone of its 2008 success—the starters’ combined 3.95 ERA was the second-best mark in the A.L.—and all of the Rays’ starting pitchers are young and locked up for several more years. So which starter does Price beat out this spring?

The Rays’ rotation candidates and their 2008 regular-season stats:

STARTER (AGE ON OPENING DAY 2009)	STARTS	RECORD	ERA	STRIKEOUTS
LHP Scott Kazmir (25)	27	12-8	3.49	166
RHP James Shields (27)	33	14-8	3.56	160
RHP Matt Garza (25)	30	11-9	3.70	128
RHP Andy Sonnanstine (26)	30	13-9	4.38	124
RHP Edwin Jackson (25)	32	14-11	4.42	108
LHP David Price* (23)	19	12-1	2.30	109

*Combined minor league totals (Class A, AA and AAA)

— Ryan Fagan



Don’t look in the bullpen for Price next season. He’ll almost certainly crack the Rays’ young rotation.



ROCCO BALDELLI

A great story within a great story

The name—Rocco Baldelli—resonates ballplayer. Tall and lean, Baldelli looks like a ballplayer. No surprise, then, that he always has been a ballplayer.

As a high school star in Rhode Island, scouts actually compared Baldelli to Joe DiMaggio, and not only because of both players' Italian roots and the No. 5s on their uniforms. Baldelli showed five-tool potential and played with a grace reminiscent of the Yankee Clipper.

The Rays drafted Baldelli with the sixth overall pick in 2000. He reached the majors in 2003 at 21 and posted impressive stats in his rookie season: 156 games, 78 RBIs, 89 runs scored, 27 stolen bases.

Five years later, however, those numbers remain Baldelli's career bests.

Injuries cost him an entire season (2005) and large chunks of two others (2006 and 2007). Then came the real bad news. Last spring, Baldelli had to

leave the Rays to deal with a condition that left him chronically tired after he hardly lifted a finger, much less a bat. The official diagnosis is a mitochondrial disorder. And it's a ballplayer's nightmare. As a result of the condition, Baldelli played in a career-low 28 games this season.

Perhaps the only longer shot than the Rays making the World Series this season was Baldelli being there in uniform with them. But with rest, determination and a daily dose of vitamins, he returned to action with the Rays on August 10. And there he was in Game 2 of the World Series, playing nine innings in the field for the first time since May 2007. "It was nice to slap five with the guys on the field for a change," he says.

Baldelli's regular season was forgettable, but his postseason will be remembered. In that Game 2, he didn't get a hit, but he helped turn a double play from

the outfield and he beat out a potential double-play grounder that saved the Rays an out and gave them a chance to score a run. He also slugged a pinch-hit homer in Game 5 and homered at Fenway Park during the ALCS. "No better story," teammate Cliff Floyd says. "To see him even swing a bat after what he went through in spring training, it's amazing."

Baldelli's future in baseball remains as much a mystery as does a cure for his condition. He proved his worth as part-time player this postseason, though, and as a major league scout says, "He still has five tools even if he can't use them every day."

— Stan McNeal

Baldelli played in only 28 games during the regular season but gave the Rays a boost in the playoffs.

A DYNASTY IN THE MAKING?

The Rays are young and talented but play in baseball's toughest division. The Red Sox pushed the Rays to a seventh game in the ALCS this season, even though Boston was far from full strength. The Yankees figure to load up on free agents for their move into a new ballpark. And with as much pitching as any team in the A.L., the Blue Jays were the best fourth-place team in baseball. Beating out at least two of these three A.L. East rivals will take a storybook-type season every year.

Three key questions facing the Rays:

◆ **Will Rocco Baldelli return?**

The Rays have said they want him back, but when Baldelli's career was in doubt, they declined his option for '09. "This team has been tremendous to me," Baldelli says. "I love the players and the people running the team." Baldelli realizes wherever he plays, he will be restricted to part-time duties—and, therefore, a smaller salary—because of his condition.

◆ **Who will close?**

Troy Percival has another year on his contract, but he is 39 and broke down this season. Righthander Dan Wheeler remains the best option, but the club, bolstered by reaching the postseason, could dip into the free-agent market. After Francisco Rodriguez, the best available closers are lefthander Brian Fuentes and righthander Kerry Wood. With a surplus of starters, Tampa Bay also could trade for a closer.

◆ **What changes will they make?**

The rotation is deep, the bullpen is solid and the lineup includes fixtures at every position except right field and designated hitter. And manager Joe Maddon seems to thrive on the flexibility created by those two spots.

— Stan McNeal



SN'S PRESEASON
TOP 25

1. North Carolina
2. Connecticut
3. Louisville
4. Gonzaga
5. Michigan State
6. Texas
7. Duke
8. UCLA
9. Pittsburgh
10. Memphis
11. USC
12. Notre Dame
13. Purdue
14. Miami
15. Arizona State
16. Florida
17. Wake Forest
18. Marquette
19. Xavier
20. Davidson
21. Tennessee
22. Oklahoma
23. Saint Mary's
24. UNLV
25. Baylor



There are plenty of reasons to be excited about the college basketball season—**65 of them, in fact**—but none is bigger than our No. 1 team, North Carolina.

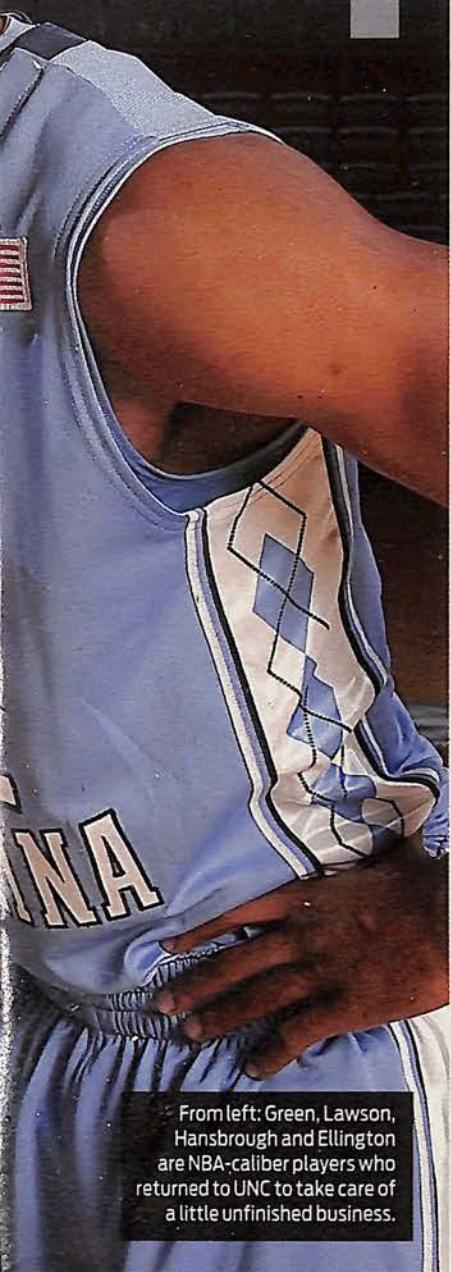
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The Heels are heavy favorites, so heavy ... THEY JUST ... CAN'T ... LOSE

By Mike DeCourcy

Photo by Bob Leverone / SN

From left: Green, Lawson, Hansbrough and Ellington are NBA-caliber players who returned to UNC to take care of a little unfinished business.



It's probably just something he grabbed out of the drawer, but the T-shirt Tyler Hansbrough has on today is speaking at least as loudly as he is. The front is decorated with the logos of the teams that gathered last April for college basketball's ultimate weekend. Hey, people cut down nets when they reach the Final Four. Don't expect him to be ashamed of the weekend he spent in San Antonio.

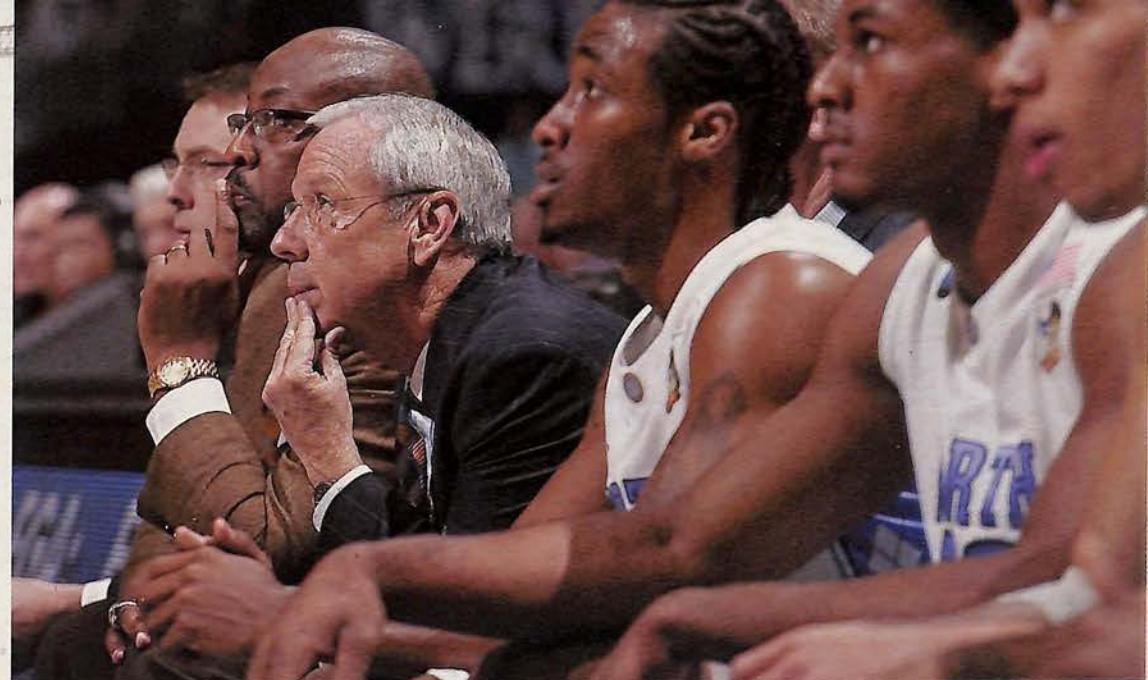
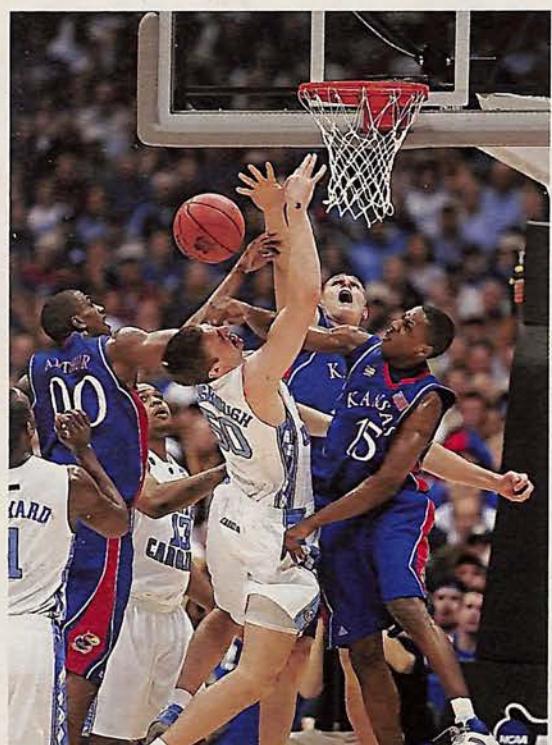
Hansbrough worked a lifetime to get there. He is proud of making it. Some people around the North Carolina campus, presumably fans of the team, did not really get that. They wondered how 36-2 (the Tar Heels' record entering their NCAA Tournament semifinal against Kansas) could turn into 40-12 (the still-flabbergasting deficit the Heels faced after 14 minutes of ball). Those people had the temerity to ask Hansbrough how that could happen. These conversations were not pleasant.

"My first reaction to that is to always get mad," Hansbrough says. "Who are they to come in and ask me what happened? Why don't they come and see what we go through on a regular basis?"

"It was tough. I mean, I ignored some people."

He says this with such sincere indignation it's hard not to chuckle. This is no laughing matter, though, because those reactions to last spring might look like the aftermath of a win over Duke compared with the response the Heels will get if they don't deliver the 2009 NCAA championship to their people. It has been more than a dozen years since anyone but the defending champ was such an overwhelming favorite. No one is picking anyone but North Carolina. We've heard of a must-win game—is there such a thing as a must-win championship?

It hardly seems reasonable to demand what amounts to perfection from the Tar Heels, but they return nearly



WE CAN'T PUT ALL OUR EGGS IN THE BASKET AND SAY, "WE'VE GOT TO WIN THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP OR ON APRIL THE SEVENTH WE'RE GOING TO MEET ON THE TOP OF THE SMITH CENTER AND EVERYBODY JUMP OFF."

—Roy Williams, North Carolina coach

every important player from last season's team and have the strong incentive to erase the memory of that Final Four debacle. Three players entered the NBA draft—point guard Ty Lawson, shooting guard Wayne Ellington and small forward Danny Green—but each withdrew and returned to the Heels. Hansbrough, though unanimously named national player of the year, decided to return just two weeks after the season. He told coach Roy Williams he was staying before he told his parents; when Williams told Hansbrough he had to tell his parents before an announcement was possible, Hansbrough eventually asked: *Don't you want me back?*

The other teams that went to San Antonio—Kansas, Memphis and UCLA—were shredded by the NBA draft. Even teams that look like advancing contenders are dealing with significant personnel issues, whether it's Connecticut waiting for absent forward Stanley Robinson, Louisville hoping to survive frontcourt losses or Michigan State remaking its attack without guard Drew Neitzel. The picture looks like this: *Carolina ... and everyone else.*

"It's no fun for anybody to be in a situation where anything but the top of the mountain is viewed as failure," says Dave Glenn, whose sports talk show on WRBZ-AM in Raleigh fielded calls from some angry Heels fans last spring. "It's up to the coach and to the players to figure out a way to create an atmosphere to smell the roses along the way and to define for themselves what success is—and to block out other people defining it for them.

"Man, it's not easy."

Kansas hammered
Hansbrough and the Tar Heels in last season's Final Four, and the loss still stings.

If Hansbrough delivers a senior season anything like his first three, he will depart as one of the NCAA's all-time greatest basketball players. And he probably will be drafted after 15 or more players who couldn't hope to match that legacy and couldn't be bothered to try.

Hansbrough is in position to become the only player selected as a first-team All-American four times. If he is as productive as he was last season, he will become, by far, the ACC's career scoring leader. He could be the seventh repeat winner of the Oscar Robertson Trophy, the first to win it twice got his name on the award, and the others include heavyweights Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Pete Maravich and Bill Walton.

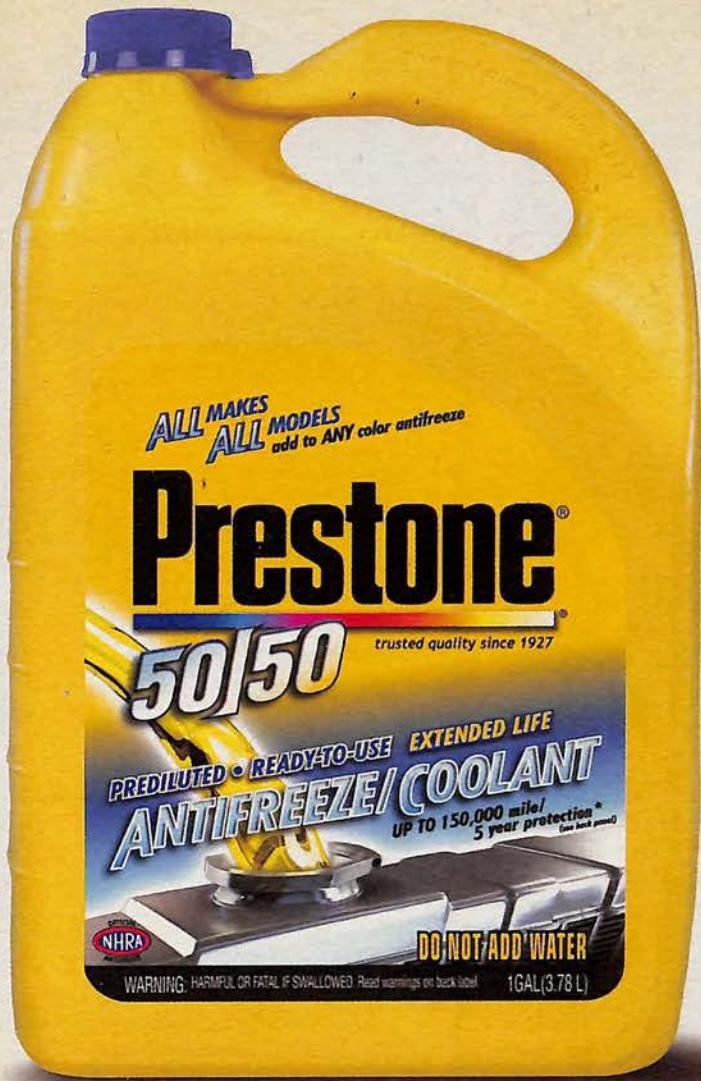
All this, in a sense, summarizes North Carolina. The Tar Heels are better than everybody without being all that much more talented. They do not appear to be loaded with top 10 NBA draft picks. They've got a fine recruiting class featuring center Tyler Zeller and power forward Ed Davis, and those two will matter a lot, but neither will become one of those one-and-done marvels who revolutionize their teams.

"You take our five against anybody else's five, there's not that big a gap," Williams says. "I can make a case for Louisville, Connecticut or Duke, whomever. But where there starts to be a gap is when we start to do 10 players. Our job is to get 7-8-9-10 to be a factor."

Carolina does this by enforcing a pace that is unfamiliar, even uncomfortable, for opponents. Only 14 Division I teams averaged 80 or more points last season, but the Tar Heels zipped along at 88.6 per game. Injuries limited them, at times, to seven or eight healthy players. They continued to accelerate.

Once small forward Marcus Ginyard recovers from a stress fracture, there will be seven upperclassmen in the rotation. Over the past two seasons, they have won 87.0 percent of their games.

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There still are issues, of course. Their defense improved enough last season to get crucial stops in victories over Duke, Virginia Tech and Louisville that were essential to the Heels' fruitful March. But they never gained any degree of dominance at that end. "We have to get better defensively," Williams says. "I want to be the best we can be at gambling and still not giving up a layup."

And though he is the player with the clearest shot at becoming an NBA lottery pick, point guard Lawson is the one Williams must work hardest to manage. Williams wants him to defend better against the ball and be more aggressive with his jump shot. Though Lawson says the two "started seeing eye to eye" last season, he casually slips in comments regarding how he has been coached. For instance: His claim he played too passively last season because Williams "told me that I need to pass more" as a freshman. Lawson even took a swipe at Williams for not calling a timeout during that epic Kansas onslaught at the Final Four, a common talk show criticism. Said Lawson: "We went, what, 15 minutes without a timeout?"

Williams got a disgruntled Rashad McCants over the finish line in 2005, so this might seem like cake, but Lawson is the player whose performance has the most room to improve. He averaged 12.7 points and 5.2 assists as a sophomore and obviously still is laboring to gain a firm grip on the college game. If he were to become dominant, which is within reach, the Heels might be unstoppable. This really matters more than where the Heels are ranked as the season begins.

"To me there wasn't one more bit more pressure on the preseason No. 1 than the preseason No. 5 or No. 10. I could care less," says Kansas coach Bill Self. His 2004-05 Jayhawks were the top team in preseason and became a first-round NCAA victim. He made up for it later.

"The ranking makes for good recruiting mailouts, but after you throw it up you're trying to get your team to be as good as that team can be."

Although every team at the 2008 Final Four was a No. 1 seed, and each had won its conference regular-season and tournament championship, and each had won at least 92.0 percent of



its games, North Carolina carried the No. 1 poll ranking. So the public was tricked into believing the Tar Heels had brought the best team.

"There wasn't a consensus best team, and they were expected to win it, anyway, and their fans were just as upset when they didn't win," says ESPN analyst Jay Bilas.

So the current Tar Heels may be in a better situation because they actually will be the best team this season. Their challenge is to work toward proving it in each game—and improving in each practice. They cannot afford to be obsessed with what happened against Kansas or what might develop this time.

"The season's too long to get into all that," Bilas says. "You can't win the national championship in October or November. You can't have some kind of national championship motor that runs all the time."

"I think they'll be fine. (Williams is) not the type to allow them to coast or be satisfied, just looking forward to the end of the season."

Hansbrough arrived at North Carolina three years ago with lots of big dreams, and he has never been ashamed to admit some of those goals were personal. It meant something to earn player of the year honors, assuring his Carolina jersey would be retired alongside those of Phil Ford, Michael Jordan and James Worthy. But most of the individual goals have been met. What's left is a championship. He wants it desperately.

Hansbrough says, "I don't think we want to rush anything, look straight to the national championship." But there is the danger he could put too much pressure on himself to deliver that title.

"It's the reason I'm talking to the team already," Williams says. "We can't put all our eggs in the basket and say, 'We've got to win the national championship or on April the seventh we're going to meet on the top of the Smith Center and everybody jump off.'"

It's hard not to laugh at that, as well.

"That's the response I get from the guys," Williams says. "They sorta chuckle."

If Lawson unlocks his potential, he'll take the Tar Heels to an even scarier level.

2

ALL-AMERICAN SPOTLIGHT

TYLER HANSBROUGH:

a quiet leader—for now

6-9 senior forward, North Carolina

The Tar Heels were forced to labor through 26 minutes and 49 seconds of basketball after falling 28 points behind Kansas under the blinding Final Four spotlight. They've had to endure about seven months of inactivity before getting to play another game that counts. Even coach Roy Williams still doesn't have a handle on why his team started so poorly that evening, but one player has an idea why the decline accelerated so rapidly.

"We didn't talk that much," point guard Ty Lawson says. "We were trying to get stops, but we didn't come together as a team."

Sometime after Kansas began its surge, the Tar Heels needed somebody to grab them by the jerseys, figuratively or literally, and remind them they'd played too long together to come apart at that juncture of the season.

This is the last step toward greatness for Hansbrough.

"I think that's one thing Coach has stressed—to talk more, be more vocal," Hansbrough says. "I think I've always led in an example type of way."

No one has ever done a better job with that brand of leadership. He has been doing it since his freshman season, when he became a *Sporting News* All-American by willfully a rebuilding Carolina team many thought might miss the NCAA Tournament to a No. 3 seed.

For the first time in his college career, Hansbrough will miss extended practice time—probably two weeks—with a stress reaction in his shin. But it's difficult for any Tar Heel to deliver a halfhearted effort when the team's best player has spent years tearing through the weight room, showing up early for practice and absorbing extreme physical punishment through the course of every game. In addition to all that, Hansbrough became the consensus national player of the year as a junior by increasing his scoring output when Lawson was lost for the better part of a month because of an ankle injury.

Hansbrough is a quiet guy, though, which makes him uncomfortable embracing the notion of leading by command. Lots of times the most talented member of a group would rather someone else get the attention—think Eddie Van Halen on the side slicing sizzling riffs while David Lee Roth steps to the center of the circus. But every team needs a respected figure to get everybody else in order during difficult moments.

And it doesn't hurt if that person is physically imposing. With Connecticut's 2004 national championship team, Emeka Okafor's by-example leadership was just as impressive as Hansbrough's. Equally important, though, is that the other Huskies weren't all that interested in finding out what the consequences might be if they failed to follow.

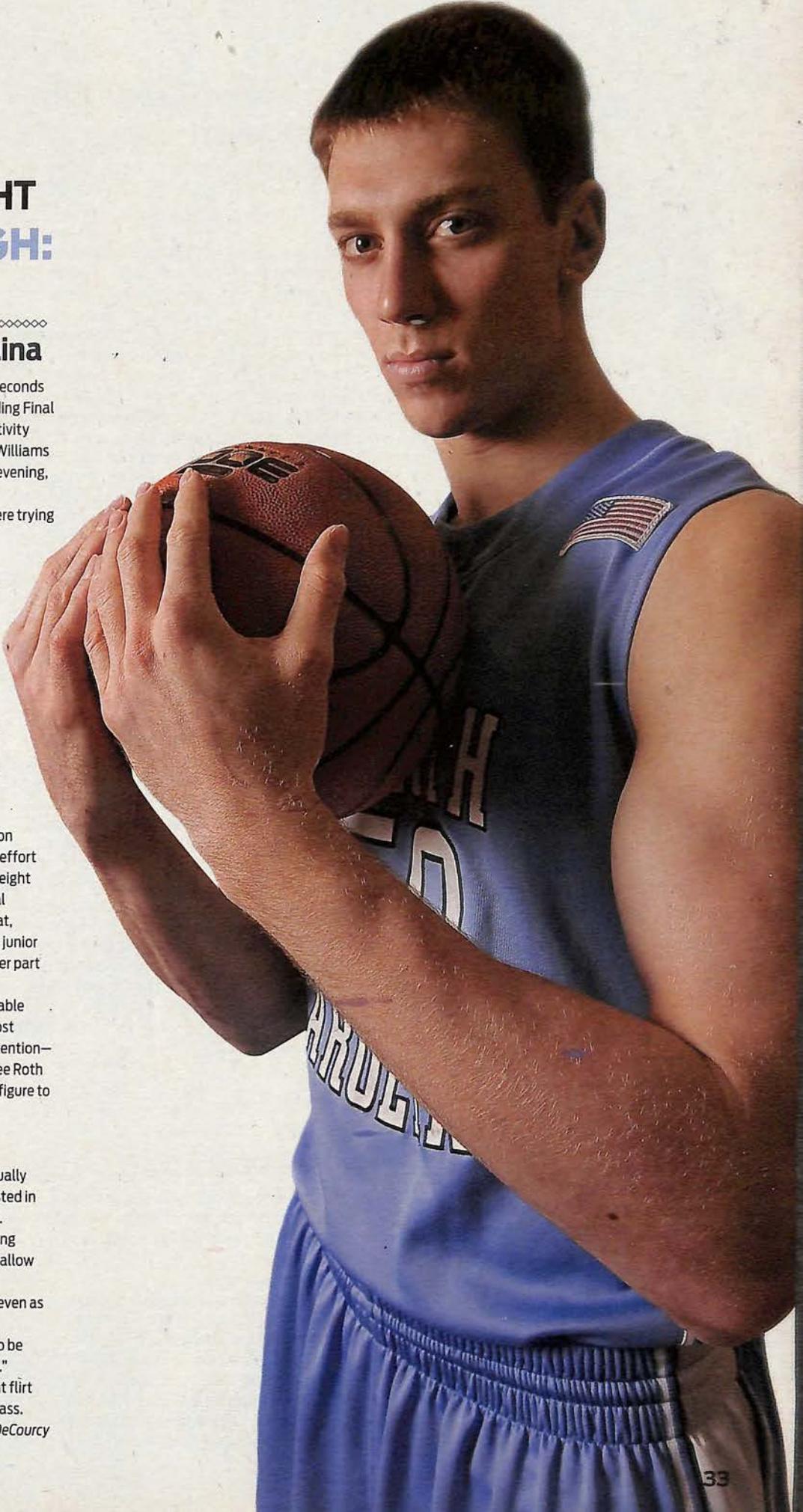
Hansbrough, who is 6-9, 250, says he can't imagine himself getting physical with a teammate. But the Heels might be better off if he'd allow them to imagine that happening.

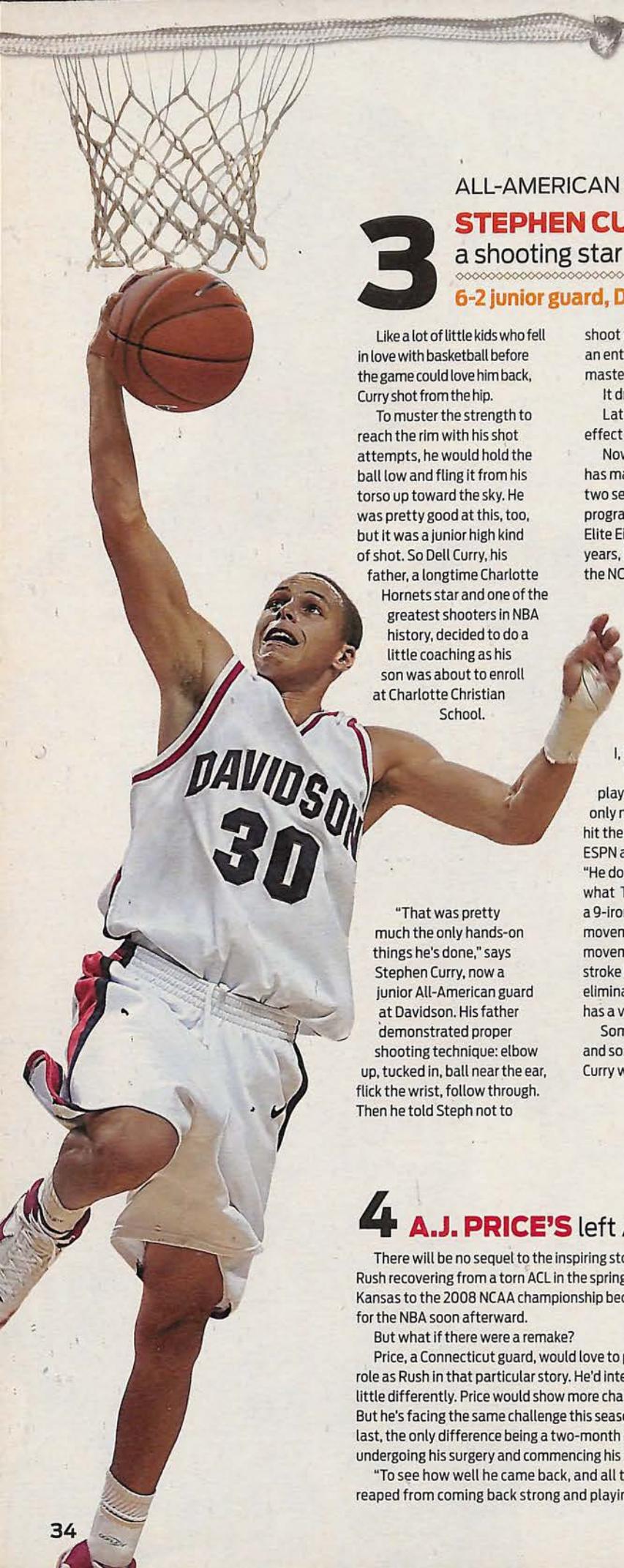
Williams believes Hansbrough is a far better player than he was even as college basketball's best last season.

"But if you make 98 on the test, your improvement is not going to be very significant," Williams says. "If you make 70, you can jump to 85."

Hansbrough would be closer to 100, though—and the Heels might flirt with perfection—if he stood more comfortably at the head of the class.

—Mike DeCourcy





ALL-AMERICAN SPOTLIGHT

3 STEPHEN CURRY: a shooting star

6-2 junior guard, Davidson

Like a lot of little kids who fell in love with basketball before the game could love him back, Curry shot from the hip.

To muster the strength to reach the rim with his shot attempts, he would hold the ball low and fling it from his torso up toward the sky. He was pretty good at this, too, but it was a junior high kind of shot. So Dell Curry, his father, a longtime Charlotte Hornets star and one of the greatest shooters in NBA history, decided to do a little coaching as his son was about to enroll at Charlotte Christian School.

"That was pretty much the only hands-on things he's done," says Stephen Curry, now a junior All-American guard at Davidson. His father demonstrated proper shooting technique: elbow up, tucked in, ball near the ear, flick the wrist, follow through. Then he told Steph not to

shoot from outside the lane for an entire summer so he could master this approach.

It drove Steph crazy.

Lately, it's having the same effect on opponents.

Now 6-3, 185 pounds, Curry has made 284 3-pointers in two seasons at Davidson, the program he led to the 2008 Elite Eight. If he plays two more years, he might obliterate the NCAA record of 457, held by Duke's J.J. Redick.

Curry averaged 25.9 points last season and could, with two seasons similar to his sophomore year, become the No. 2 career scorer in Division I, behind Pete Maravich.

"He is one of the rare players I've seen who not only makes shots, but they hit the center of the goal," says ESPN analyst Fran Fraschilla. "He does with a jump shot what Tiger Woods does with a 9-iron. There's very little movement in his shot. The less movement, the more pure your stroke becomes because you eliminate all the variables. He has a very compact stroke."

Some shooters are born, and some are made. Maybe Curry was both.

—Mike DeCourcy



(5)

The only jump **TYLER HANSBROUGH** made in the offseason was off a frat house balcony, not to the NBA

(6)

The madness has already begun at Arizona

When practice began, Arizona had a legendary coach with 780 career victories. Now it has an interim caretaker whose last experience was working with AAU kids. Who was in charge of the transition from Lute Olson to Russ Pennell? The folks at AIG? Pennell paid his assistant coaching dues, but a program like Arizona's should not have wound up in the hands of someone who hasn't coached at this level since 2006. It was clear the U of A athletic director had no plan. Give Jim Livengood an "F."

7 PATRICK MILLS of Saint Mary's could be the next Stephen Curry

WHY?

1. If the pros in the Olympics couldn't handle Mills' speed when he was playing for Australia, how will college guys keep him out of the lane?

2. The confidence he gained playing in Beijing should help him continue to improve on his 32.3 percent 3-point shooting.

3. Like Curry, he plays for an underappreciated coach on an excellent team that could be dangerous in March.

4 A.J. PRICE'S left ACL is in one piece again

There will be no sequel to the inspiring story of Brandon Rush recovering from a torn ACL in the spring of 2007 to lead Kansas to the 2008 NCAA championship because Rush left for the NBA soon afterward.

But what if there were a remake?

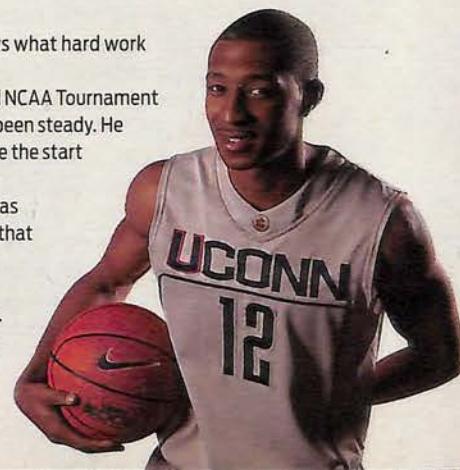
Price, a Connecticut guard, would love to play the same role as Rush in that particular story. He'd interpret the part a little differently. Price would show more charisma and flair. But he's facing the same challenge this season as Rush did last, the only difference being a two-month head start on undergoing his surgery and commencing his rehabilitation.

"To see how well he came back, and all the benefits he reaped from coming back strong and playing well, is very

impressive," Price says. "It really shows what hard work can do."

Price was hurt in UConn's first-round NCAA Tournament loss to San Diego, but his recovery has been steady. He has been working with the Huskies since the start of practice.

Comebacks aren't new to Price. He has recovered from a serious brain ailment that delayed his freshman year and then a legal issue and subsequent university suspension that wiped out that season. Price says this comeback is not his first, "and not my hardest one, either."



CURRY: BOB LEVERONE / SH: HANSBROUGH: RIVALS: PRICE: BOB LEVERONE / SH

(8)

Sometimes a new address is all you need

SG Alex Legion—from Kentucky to Illinois. The Illini need all the talent they can get.

PF Ryan Wright—from UCLA to Oklahoma. He was a coveted recruit but couldn't crack the Bruins' rotation. The Sooners need frontcourt cover for star Blake Griffin.

SG Denis Clemente—from Miami to Kansas State. With K-State losing all of Michael Beasley's production, Clemente's shoot-first game is made for Manhattan.

SG Phil Nelson—from Washington to Portland State. He had a promising future with the Huskies, but there will be more shots for this 3-point specialist in mid-major land.

PF Vernon Goodridge—from Mississippi State to LaSalle. He could remake the Explorers' frontcourt.

(9)

There's no such thing as a defending champion

The Kansas team that won the NCAA title has been scattered to the four corners of the NBA. Only two players who appeared in the championship game, reserves Sherron Collins and Cole Aldrich, are back. So we know Kansas will repeat this year only if it first decides to lather and rinse.

(10)

Life goes on at Memphis and Kansas State without the top two picks in the NBA draft

Memphis coach John Calipari on replacing Derrick Rose: "You're not trying to have a guy play like he played because if you are, then you're setting yourself up for disappointment. We've lost experience, athleticism... we lost a lot. But the guys that we have coming back, two of them are great leaders—Antonio Anderson and Robert Dozier. Shawn Taggart, Willie Kemp, Doneal Mack. All got experience, and we brought in a group of good players to add to those guys."

Kansas State coach Frank Martin on replacing Michael Beasley: "You deal with it before the season starts. You don't deal with it after it happens. We prepared our team with the understanding that Mike was only going to be here one year. That's why I believe in depth. I think we are going to be a lot more balanced this year because we don't have a player like Mike or even like Bill (Walker) that is so dominant on the offensive side of the floor."



Greenberg's Hokies are one of a few "new" teams that have been taking it to the rest of the ACC.

Virginia Tech coach Seth Greenberg says folks have it backward when it comes to ACC basketball and the success the Hokies and Miami have enjoyed since joining the league four years ago.

"People think the ACC is down because Virginia Tech and Miami are winning," he says. "The ACC is not down; Virginia Tech and Miami are good."

Perceptions change when schools better known for football start beating North Carolina and Duke—both have lost ACC games to the newcomers. And Virginia Tech and Miami seem poised to contend again.

Even though the Canes have put in four years, Miami senior guard Jack McClinton says his team still "always plays with a chip on its shoulder."

That chip produced an 8-8 league record last season, the Hurricanes' best since joining the ACC. Tech has had three seasons of .500 or better, and Boston College—which jumped from the Big East three years ago—won 21 of its first 32 ACC games before falling to 4-12 last year.

Clearly, the new guys have shaken things up. Now if only the rest of the ACC wouldn't be offended when a couple of traditional football powers beat the ACC's best in hoops.

—Bill Eichenberger



MY TURN

Mike Gminski, Duke center
1979 ACC player of the year

I don't know how realistic it is for any team to run the table. Even North Carolina. You play too many games, and there are too many good teams out there. I do think Duke can compete with North Carolina, especially at Cameron Indoor Stadium. I don't know if there's anybody involved in the sport that doesn't have North Carolina as its prohibitive favorite. You know, back in '84, North

Carolina had a pretty good team with (Michael) Jordan and (Sam) Perkins that wound up not winning. That is the beauty of the tournament.



12 LESTER HUDSON is going to light it up

The reigning Ohio Valley Conference player of the year, Hudson scored 30 or more points 11 times as a junior at Tennessee-Martin, finished fifth in the NCAA in scoring at 25.7 points per game, then checked into the NBA draft to see what it was like. He became a hero at his small college town for returning to play as a senior.

"When school first started the fans and the boosters—they were ready for the season to start that day," Hudson says. "So they're very excited in Martin to see if we can make a good run this year."

Contributing: Ken Bradley, Mike DeCourcy, Bill Eichenberger



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13 Notre Dame's LUKE HARANGODY might hurt somebody

He never does it on purpose, of course. He plays hard, and he can bench-press a Volvo, so things happen.

(14)

This could be Gonzaga's Final Four year

If you remember the days when the Zags ruled March, you probably won't be carded at the local pub. Since they followed their trip to the 1999 Elite Eight with consecutive Sweet 16s, the Zags have been an NCAA Tournament bust. Not this time. If center Josh Heytvelt resurfaces his potential and forward Austin Daye unleashes his, Gonzaga will be a tournament darling once again.



16 PURDUE'S Paint Crew is the best student section going

Paint Crew president Dylan Reynolds tells us why:

"In all honesty, before this season we've never really had traditional creative chants or anything like that. We just get ridiculously loud. We'll fix that for this year, but we're still working out what they'll be and trying to figure out how well they'll go over."

"While we're quick to harass any opposing player for their actions on the floor, the Paint Crew keeps things classy by keeping personal attacks to a minimum. We create an intimidating atmosphere by wearing black shirts and creating vocal pandemonium; there's no need for excessive taunting. The Paint Crew's on-campus popularity really took off after last season's Wisconsin win because of the crazy atmosphere and storming of the court. Demand was so high for this season that if students weren't in line before our signups began, they were unable to obtain a general admission seat."

(17)

Great players can emerge even when their team does not

1. **Devan Downey, SG,**
South Carolina: 18.4 ppg, 5.4 apg
2. **Geary Claxton, PF,**
Penn State: 17.5 ppg, 8.4 rpg
3. **Jermaine Taylor, SG,**
Central Florida: 20.8 ppg, 4.7 rpg
4. **Josh Mayo, SG,**
Illinois-Chicago: 17.1 ppg, 9.4 3s
5. **Dior Lowhorn, F,**
San Francisco: 20.5 ppg, 7.4 rpg

Contributing: Mike DeCourcy

(15)

Not everyone was broken up to see Indiana broken up

- Xavier picked up point guard recruit Terrell Holloway, who escaped his letter of intent, and point guard Jordan Crawford, who transferred.
- West Virginia grabbed elite small forward recruit Devin Ebanks, who also got out of his letter.
- UAB scooped up guard Armon Bassett, who transferred after averaging 11.4 points.
- Kansas will likely end up with star guard Tyshawn Taylor, who would have been a freshman under Tom Crean at Marquette—had Crean not left to coach IU.



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18 SEC

The league is too good to stay down for long

After Florida had won consecutive national titles, the SEC was perched atop the college basketball world. Last season, Tennessee emerged as the league's front-runner, even pulling into the No. 1 spot in the polls for a while.

But something happened on the way to the Alamodome. Six SEC teams reached the tournament, and the Gators weren't one of them. Three SEC schools lost in the first round, two lost in the second, and the Vols departed in the Sweet 16.

Arkansas coach John Pelphrey expects the SEC to rebound.

"No question about that," he says. "This league a year ago had the past two national champions. The one thing you're seeing in college basketball right now is that it's hard to keep continuity."

Vols junior forward Tyler Smith agrees. "There are a lot of great teams," he says. "Florida returns everybody but Marreese Speights. Kentucky lost a lot, but they also gained a lot. For us, we're just paying attention to the Volunteers because we just want to make that run past the Sweet 16."

—Ken Bradley

MY TURN

Larry Conley, Kentucky forward
Captain of 'Rupp's Runts,'
the 1965-66 Wildcats team

I think Kentucky is going to be considerably better than people think. This is a team that is putting all the pieces together to become a serious player again. They've been down somewhat the last couple of years, but I fully expect them to make a recovery—they should challenge in the SEC East. My pick is Tennessee. I think they're going to be very good. I also think Kentucky, Florida and Vanderbilt will challenge Tennessee.



OUR PICKS

EAST

1. Florida
2. Tennessee
3. Kentucky
4. Vanderbilt
5. Georgia
6. South Carolina

WEST

1. LSU
2. Alabama
3. Mississippi State
4. Auburn
5. Ole Miss
6. Arkansas

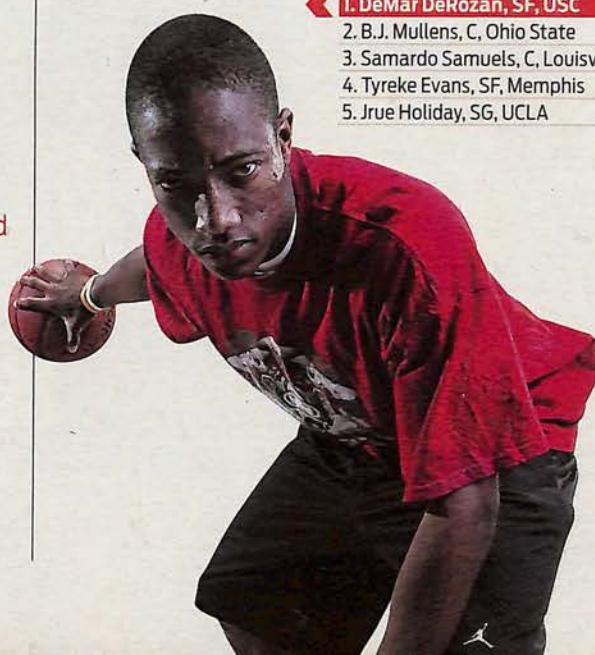
Smith and the rest of the Vols know their path to the top of the SEC East will be a lot more rugged this season.

(19)

There is no such thing as a true freshman in this game

College basketball has freshmen, of course. We were introduced to Derrick Rose, Michael Beasley and O.J. Mayo a year ago, and never once did we hear the term "true freshman"—a linguistic abomination—ascribed to any of them. So say hello to the freshmen who'll have the biggest impact in 2008-09:

1. DeMar DeRozan, SF, USC
2. B.J. Mullens, C, Ohio State
3. Samardo Samuels, C, Louisville
4. Tyreke Evans, SF, Memphis
5. Jrue Holiday, SG, UCLA



(20)

There's always someone at Georgetown who needs to duck under the door frame.

To the legacy of Georgetown big men that includes Patrick Ewing, Alonzo Mourning, Dikembe Mutombo, Othella Harrington and Roy Hibbert, the Hoyas can add 6-10 Greg Monroe of Gretna, La. That is, if he wants to play like a big man. Monroe once was the consensus No. 1 prospect in the class of 2008, but his ratings slipped as he focused on perimeter play.

(21)

Sometimes the NBA draft's early-entry process gives back

1. Chase Budinger, SF, Arizona
2. Robert Vaden, SG, UAB
3. Jerel McNeal, SG, Marquette
4. A.J. Abrams, SG, Texas
5. Josh Akognon, SG, Cal State Fullerton

(22)

Football money hasn't killed all the basketball schools yet

Since its quiet launch in 1976, the Atlantic 10 has had moments of glory (Massachusetts in the 1996 Final Four) and ignominy (26-2 George Washington earning a No. 8 seed in the 2006 NCAAs). But the A-10 staged a bit of a comeback last year, squeezing three teams into the NCAA field and marching Xavier all the way to the Elite Eight. This season will represent another step forward for what should be, for the second straight season, the best of the non-BCS leagues. When you can put together an all-league team of Derrick Brown (Xavier), Chris Wright (Dayton), Dionte Christmas (Temple), Ahmad Nivins (Saint Joseph's) and Kevin Lisch (Saint Louis), your guys can play.



(23)

UNLV is back

Take it from former Runnin' Rebels coach Jerry Tarkanian, who thinks Lon Kruger's fifth season in charge will be his finest: "They're doing a great job. Lon is doing a great job. I watched them practice, and I like this team. I think this is the most talented team he's had since he's been here. I don't think there's any question about that."

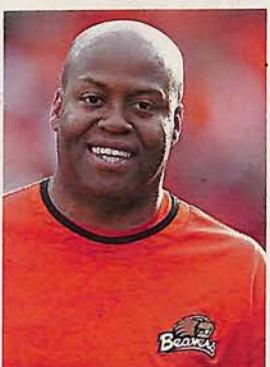
(24)

The Galen Center has transformed USC-UCLA from a mismatch to a rivalry

Recruiting kids to play in the depressing Sports Arena was like selling vacation condos in South Waziristan. Although UCLA has won both its games at USC since the gleaming Galen Center opened in 2006, the Trojans at last can attract such players as O.J. Mayo and DeMar DeRozan to compete with the West Coast's preeminent power.

25 Oregon State's new coach has had a busier fall than his famous brother-in-law

Craig Robinson—brother of Barack Obama's wife, Michelle—is taking over the Oregon State program that lost all 18 of its Pac-10 games last season.



SN: Why take over an O-18 program?

ROBINSON: First of all, you take over an O-18 program because there's nowhere to go but up. I'm sort of being facetious—the real attraction to this was a couple things. This program has had basketball success. Rather than trying to create a culture of winning, you just have to get back to it. That was intriguing to me. You're talking about arguably the best basketball conference in the country over the last couple of years.

SN: What would be your team's equivalent of your football team's win over USC?

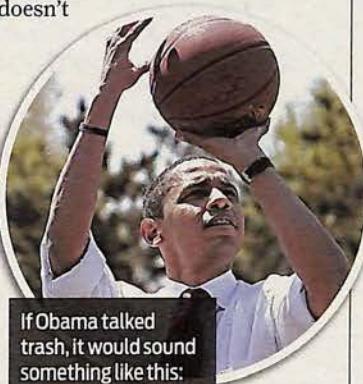
ROBINSON: Unless one of our conference games is going to be against the No. 1 team, I don't think there will be a game of that magnitude. To (beat) the No. 1 team in the country, on national TV, on a night where there aren't very many other games on, it doesn't get much better than that.

SN: What type of player is Barack Obama?

ROBINSON: Barack is a very good pickup basketball player. He can shoot, he can dribble, he's got good court awareness. He can fit in with 80 percent of pickup games and be one of the better players.

SN: Can you give him a hard foul if the Secret Service is watching?

ROBINSON: No one will hard foul him now because everybody realizes what's at stake. That's a good thing—he doesn't have to worry about that.



If Obama talked trash, it would sound something like this: "You can't guard me. The Secret Service can't guard me."

SN: You didn't have a traditional coaching career in that you spent the '90s as a bond trader. What made you decide to forgo that and try coaching?

ROBINSON: There are times when you're going to work and, I think we all feel it, where you start to think, "Boy, this job, now I understand why they call it work," and it's not necessarily a passion. While I had a very lucrative career in the financial world, it didn't get me going every day. I started coaching high school while I was working. I thought, "Now this is something I'd like to do. If at some point I retire and save enough money to send my kids to college, I'd love to teach seventh grade and coach high school basketball. My plan was accelerated by the fact Bill Carmody offered me an assistant coaching job at Northwestern. I got back into it for the passion."

— Matt Crossman



(26)

There may be rich guys in the prime seats, but at least they're not attention-hungry celebs

What could be more pathetic than all the movie stars who show up at Lakers games pretending they care who wins? Folks go to college basketball games to see, not to be seen. And that includes No. 1 Kentucky fan Ashley Judd.

27 All-American spotlight

AUSTIN DAYE: An in-between machine

6-10 sophomore forward, Gonzaga

Don't tell Daye the midrange jump shot will suffer the same fate as short shorts and set shots. "I think it's coming back," the Gonzaga sophomore says. "I think you'll see more coaches going to it."

Daye is doing his part in making 15-foot jumpers relevant. He's on our preseason All-American team largely because of his midrange shot. "(It's) the strength of my game," says Daye, who averaged 10.5 points in 18.5 minutes last season. Daye spent much of his summer strengthening his right knee, which he injured at a skills clinic. The initial diagnosis—torn ACL—proved incorrect, and Daye says the knee "is stronger than it was before."

It's no surprise someone raised by a UCLA product is well-versed in such a fundamental part of the game. Darren Daye, an early-1980s Bruins standout, has stressed ballhandling and shooting skills since his son first picked up a basketball in his hometown of Irvine, Calif.

"He always was a good shooter, so to make him a better player, he needed to have the penetration," Darren says.

Such versatility pays off for a 6-10 forward who doesn't like to bang. "I can use my ballhandling to drive around bigger, slow guys, and the 6-6 guys I can shoot over," Austin says.

He already has had plenty of practice against the rugged 6-8 types. Austin was schooled for years by his dad, who also played in the NBA, before beating him one-on-one near the end of his junior year at Woodbridge High. "A big, big deal," Austin says.

And if they played 10 times now? "I wouldn't beat him all 10. Eight or nine. I wouldn't want to make him feel too bad. He's getting a little older (47)."

He already was old school enough to teach his son the value of the midrange game.

— Stan McNeal



Contributing: Ken Bradley, Matt Crossman, Mike DeCourcy, Stan McNeal



(28)

The coaching carousel took quite a spin last spring

The top five hires of 2008:

- 1. Tom Crean, Indiana
- 2. Trent Johnson, LSU
- 3. Mike Montgomery, California
- 4. John Groce, Ohio
- 5. Bill Bayno, Loyola Marymount



(29)

In this game, the polls are for decoration

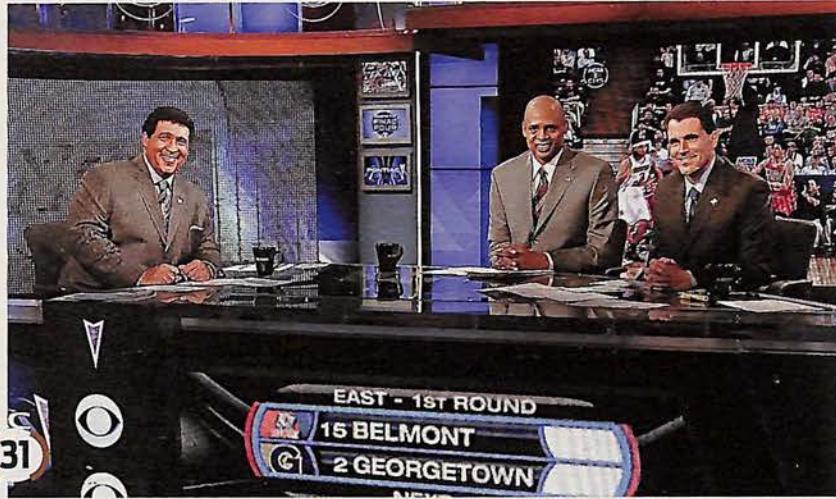
Kansas was No. 4 in the final Associated Press poll last season. If this were football, the Jayhawks would have watched the championship game on television.

(30)

Senior Night is not out of style

Among those who will finish strong in 2009:

- 1. Tyler Hansbrough, North Carolina
- 2. Sam Young, Pitt
- 3. Jon Brockman, Washington
- 4. Jack McClinton, Miami
- 5. Donte Christmas, Temple



31

Selection Sunday is like Christmas Eve

This year's date: March 15. There will be no Billy Packer to ignore the selection criteria and gripe about a lack of ACC bids, but there will certainly be controversy. For instance:

1. **Big East bids.** When the league places nine teams in the field, there will be gripes about the NCAAs being a regional tournament.

2. **Davidson's seed.** When the Wildcats wind up in an 8-9 game, some No. 1 seed will

Don't look for Packer in that empty space between Greg Gumbel (left) and Clark Kellogg.

freak over having to guard Stephen Curry in Round 2.

3. **Last team out.** The last team off the bubble always feels mistreated. Oklahoma State looks like that team this year.

(32)

The Big Five still is a big deal in Philadelphia

How we size up Philly's finest:

1. Villanova	2. Saint Joseph's	3. Temple	4. La Salle	5. Penn

33 Seton Hall coach **BOBBY 'GONZO' GONZALEZ** might live up to his nickname at any moment

Last season alone he:

► Reportedly was involved in an altercation with assistant coach Scott Adubato at halftime of a February game against West Virginia. Seton Hall investigated and found "no evidence" of a fight. Gonzalez acknowledged the two argued during the game.

► Criticized game officials following a March loss to rival Rutgers and was suspended by the Big East for this season's first league game. Commissioner Mike Tranghese said he was "embarrassed" by a postgame squabble between Gonzalez and Rutgers coach Fred Hill.

► Angered A.D. Joe Quinlan by writing a column for *The New York Times* in which he offered tips on picking the NCAA Tournament field. "It could put the individual and the university in a less than favorable position," Quinlan told *The New York Post*.



What are you going to do when Gonzo-mania runs wild on you?

(34)

There are no more (Derrick) Caracter issues at Louisville

► **October 2006:** The NCAA suspends Caracter from his first three games at Louisville for accepting "extra benefits" from a family friend.

► **December 2006:** Coach Rick Pitino suspends Caracter and sends him home to deal with "multiple issues." Pitino suggests he might not return. "Maybe he should hire a strength coach," Pitino tells reporters. "His goal is to be out of here the second he's ready. The day he's ready to go to the NBA and be a first-round pick, he's gone."

► **December 2007:** Louisville suspends Caracter indefinitely after he breaks a disciplinary "contract" with the program.

► **March 2008:** While Louisville is in Charlotte competing in the NCAA Sweet 16, Caracter declares he will enter the NBA draft.

► **May 2008:** Pitino tells *The Courier-Journal* of Louisville it would be best if Caracter tried "a different place."

► **June 2008:** Caracter pulls out of the NBA draft and announces that he will leave Louisville.



35

ALL-AMERICAN SPOTLIGHT

JAMES HARDEN:
a driving force6-4 sophomore guard,
Arizona State

Harden often leaves Arizona State opponents muttering under their breath and his teammates singing his praises. Jamal Boykin has been both—he played on the same summer league team as Harden and faces him twice a year as a forward for Cal. Boykin's take: "He's a trailblazer."

That's high praise, and it should be true in two ways this season. Harden is expected to take the Sun Devils to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2003, and along the way he will scorch the court on the way to the hoop.

Harden's 7.5 free throw attempts per game last season reflect how often he attacks the rim. What makes Harden unique is that on the way to the hoop, he would rather pass to a teammate than score himself.

"He's really special from the standpoint he doesn't care how many points he scored, how many shots he took," Arizona State coach Herb Sendek says of the Pac-10's top returning scorer (17.8 points a game). "He knows when it's time to be assertive. He just has a real feel for what needs to be done for his team at any given moment."

Harden's speed isn't blazing, but a quick first step and solid body positioning help him get to the rim. He has a slight advantage going to the basket because he's lefthanded, which defenders aren't used to seeing. But the advantage also was limited last year, his freshman season. One, opponents knew where he was going. Two, he either drove or shot a 3. Harden spent the offseason doing everything righthanded and working on his midrange game.

"If I can get my right hand to be almost as strong as my left hand," he says, "I'll be a lot better basketball player."

— Matt Crossman

36

Everyone loves a good scare

Like a haunted house at Halloween or another edition of the Saw torture pictures—actually, more like the latter—these are the places any visitor this winter will be terrified to see:

1. Belk Arena, Davidson. The big-timers aren't coming here.

2. Smith Center, North Carolina. The audience isn't as cheese-and-wine as when Sam Cassell visited with Florida State. And the Heels are beastly.

3. Cameron Indoor Stadium, Duke. Raise your hand if you think anyone but Carolina can win there this season.

4. Wherever UConn calls home. Bouncing between Hartford and Storrs prevents the Huskies from establishing a home-court identity, but they've won 83 percent of their home games under Jim Calhoun.

5. FedEx Forum, Memphis. The Tigers have won 58 of their past 60 games at home, in the same building where the Memphis Grizzlies put up identical 14-27 records the past two years. Maybe it's the team that matters.



(37)

A Detroit Final Four can't be as depressing as we fear

WHY?

- 1. Greektown restaurants.
- 2. Maestro Leonard Slatkin conducts Berg's violin concerto with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.
- 3. Two words: Casino gambling.



(38)

BracketBusters works

In the six seasons before ESPN introduced the BracketBusters event, mid-majors from Busters-type leagues received 13 at-large bids to the NCAA Tournament. In the six seasons since, those mid-majors got 21 bids. That's a 61.5 percent increase—and that's not counting Gonzaga's 2008 at-large appearance because the Zags have outgrown the event.

Does anyone still wish to question the value of one weekend of ball devoted to raising mid-major awareness?

Things can get a little scary at Cameron Indoor, right Biko Paris?



Contributing: Matt Crossman, Mike DeCourcy



39 Big 12

At the top, it's anything but more of the same

A Big 12 season without Kansas in the top three is as rare as Saturday night in Austin, Texas, without live music.

Well, fortunately, Sixth Street will never go silent. Texas is *Sporting News'* choice to win the conference, and even the coach of our No. 2 pick, Oklahoma's Jeff Capel, agrees.

"Without hesitation," he says. "(Senior guard) A.J. Abrams averaged 17 last year. I think people undervalue that (he's back)."

Capel may be trying to dim the spotlight on his team because the Sooners are the choice of Big 12 coaches. And what about Kansas?

"I put us right behind those two," says Kansas junior guard Sherron Collins, who is embracing the underdog role. "It's better for us not to have that beginning-of-the-season pressure. That will allow us to play more free-minded."

Don't feel too sorry for the Jayhawks, who lost five players to the NBA draft after winning the NCAA title.

"It doesn't matter if we're favored, or Oklahoma. Just about any team can win the Big 12," Texas center Connor Atchley says. "You watch, KU will have a good team."

But for once, the Jayhawks aren't right at the top.

—Stan McNeal

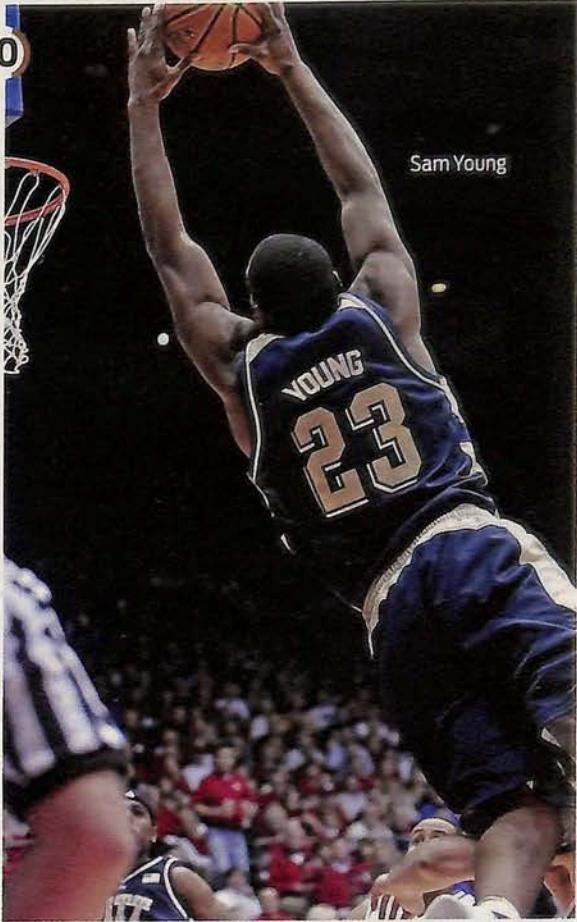


MY TURN
Chris Piper, Kansas forward
Starter for the Jayhawks' 1988
NCAA championship team

Kansas has two great guys to build around. With Sherron (Collins), the key is his health. When his weight is down, his speed picks up. He really was unstoppable at times last season. Midway through last year, you knew you were going to lose the whole front line, and you saw glimpses from Cole (Aldrich) of what he could do to replace them. They've got so many young guys coming in, and post position is one of those it takes a while to figure out. I expect them to be top four in the Big 12. At Kansas, no matter what, you come in always expecting to battle for a league championship, to be in the NCAA Tournament and have a shot at doing something.

The end of dunk prohibition 32 years ago freed Xavier's **DERRICK BROWN**, Pitt's **SAM YOUNG** and Duke's **GERALD HENDERSON** to slam you out of your seat

(40)



(41)

These guys are fighting for their jobs

► **Gary Williams, Maryland.** Could he be fired just seven years after winning a national championship? Absolutely not. But already some program boosters have suggested it might be time for Williams to retire. He isn't buying it. Williams is too competitive to walk away now.

► **Jeff Lebo, Auburn.** Entering his fifth season, Lebo hasn't made an NCAA trip, is under .500 with the Tigers and hasn't recruited many elite players. Oh, and Auburn is investing \$92.5 million in a new basketball arena. One way or the other, the school will want some positive momentum heading into the 2010 opening.

► **Dennis Felton, Georgia.** Given the mess he inherited—the emphasis Georgia placed upon changing the program's culture—Felton should not have been under win-or-else pressure last March. But he was, and he chose the first option. The Bulldogs probably need to follow up on that success, though. The SEC is not so daunting that a first-division finish is unrealistic.



(42)

These guys are fighting for better jobs

It might not be a big year for coaching changes, but these gifted assistants are waiting for their breaks:

► **Chris Collins and Steve Wojciechowski, Duke.** Each has assisted Mike Krzyzewski for nearly a decade. Each is personable, bright and widely known. They've both been patient, too, refusing to take just any head coaching job. At some point, though, it'll be time to move.

► **Greg Gard, Wisconsin.** Nobody could stand this close to Bo Ryan for this long and not learn a ton. The coaching in this program is excellent, and so is the scouting of high school prospects. Gard's eye for talent would make a huge difference at the mid-major level.

► **Butch Pierre, Oklahoma State.** He has been a prolific recruiter for more than a decade, and his work as the interim coach at LSU last season was impressive. He'd be a dynamic hire for a program in the Southeast.

(43)

Indiana has never had a season like this

The Hoosiers won't be good. The investigation into excess recruiting calls that chased out former coach Kelvin Sampson and every single recruited scholarship player assured that. But new coach Tom Crean's furious efforts to build a foundation for future excellence certainly will make IU interesting.

Williams may feel pressure to retire if he doesn't turn things around at Maryland, but don't expect him to succumb to it.

Contributing: Mike DeCourcy

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VIAGRA® (sildenafil citrate) tablets

(vi-AG-rah)

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ABOUT ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION (ED)

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ABOUT VIAGRA

VIAGRA is used to treat ED in men. When you want to have sex, VIAGRA can help you get and keep an erection when you are sexually excited. You cannot get an erection just by taking the pill. Only your doctor can prescribe VIAGRA.

VIAGRA does not cure ED.

VIAGRA does not protect you or your partner from STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) or HIV. You will need to use a condom.

VIAGRA is not a hormone or an aphrodisiac.

WHO IS VIAGRA FOR?

Who should take VIAGRA?

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Who should NOT take VIAGRA?

- If you ever take medicines with nitrates:
 - Medicines that treat chest pain (angina), such as nitroglycerin or isosorbide mononitrate or dinitrate
- If you use some street drugs, such as "poppers" (amyl nitrate or nitrite)
- If you are allergic to anything in the VIAGRA tablet.

BEFORE YOU START VIAGRA

Tell your doctor if you have or ever had:

- Heart attack, abnormal heartbeats, or stroke
- Heart problems, such as heart failure, chest pain, or aortic valve narrowing
- Low or high blood pressure
- Severe vision loss
- An eye condition called retinitis pigmentosa
- Kidney or liver problems
- Blood problems, such as sickle cell anemia or leukemia
- A deformed penis, Peyronie's disease, or an erection that lasted more than 4 hours
- Stomach ulcers or any kind of bleeding problems

Tell your doctor about all your medicines. Include over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal products. Tell your doctor if you take or use:

- Medicines called alpha-blockers to treat high blood pressure or prostate problems. Your blood pressure could suddenly get too low. You could get dizzy or faint. Your doctor may start you on a lower dose of VIAGRA.
- Medicines called protease inhibitors for HIV. Your doctor may prescribe a 25 mg dose. Your doctor may limit VIAGRA to 25 mg in a 48-hour period.
- Other methods to cause erections. These include pills, injections, implants, or pumps.

POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF VIAGRA

Side effects are mostly mild to moderate. They usually go away after a few hours. Some of these are more likely to happen with higher doses.

The most common side effects are:

- Headache
- Feeling flushed
- Upset stomach

Less common side effects are:

- Trouble telling blue and green apart or seeing a blue tinge on things
- Eyes being more sensitive to light
- Blurred vision

Rarely, a small number of men taking VIAGRA have reported these serious events:

- Having an erection that lasts more than 4 hours. If the erection is not treated right away, long-term loss of potency could occur.
- Sudden decrease or loss of sight in one or both eyes. We do not know if these events are caused by VIAGRA and medicines like it or caused by other factors. They may be caused by conditions like high blood pressure or diabetes. If you have sudden vision changes, stop using VIAGRA and all medicines like it. Call your doctor right away.
- Sudden decrease or loss of hearing. We do not know if these events are caused by VIAGRA and medicines like it or caused by other factors. If you have sudden hearing changes, stop using VIAGRA and all medicines like it. Call your doctor right away.
- Heart attack, stroke, irregular heartbeats, and death. We do not know whether these events are caused by VIAGRA or caused by other factors. Most of these happened in men who already had heart problems.

If you have any of these problems, stop VIAGRA. Call your doctor right away.

HOW TO TAKE VIAGRA

Do:

- Take VIAGRA only the way your doctor tells you. VIAGRA comes in 25 mg, 50 mg, and 100 mg tablets. Your doctor will tell you how much to take.
- If you are over 65 or have serious liver or kidney problems, your doctor may start you at the lowest dose (25 mg).
- Take VIAGRA about 1 hour before you want to have sex. VIAGRA starts to work in about 30 minutes when you are sexually excited. VIAGRA lasts up to 4 hours.

Don't:

- Do not take VIAGRA more than once a day.
- Do not take more VIAGRA than your doctor tells you. If you think you need more VIAGRA, talk with your doctor.
- Do not start or stop any other medicines before checking with your doctor.

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VGIF Rev 4 12/07

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South Florida's Heath knows his team is making progress. It's just hard to tell when he looks at the standings in the nation's toughest conference.

Stan Heath has seen the view from the bottom before, but this is not the same. It is harder to spot the peak from here. It sometimes feels as though climbing from sea level to the summit of the Big East Conference will require thermal gear, an ice ax and a Sherpa guide.

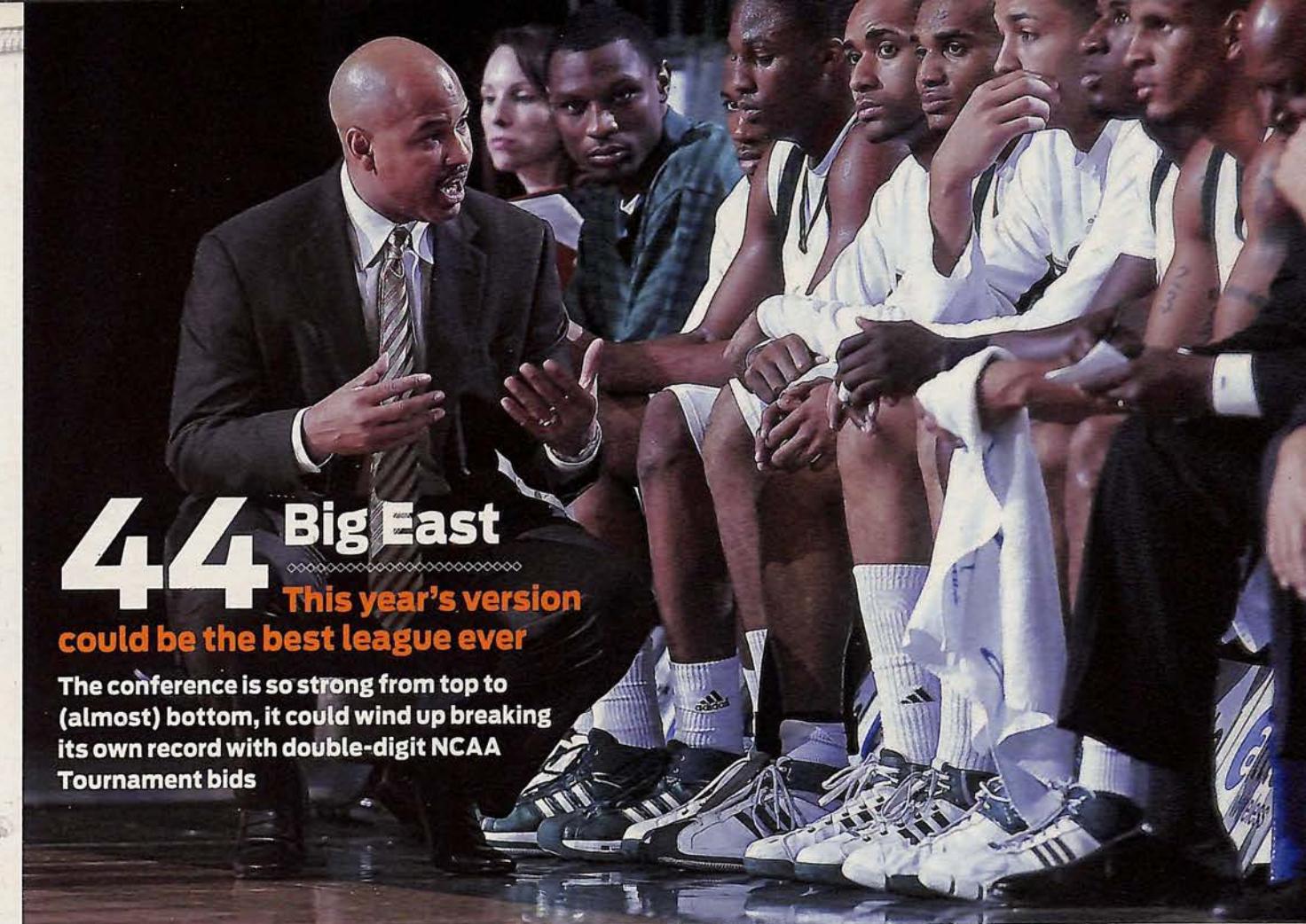
South Florida had last-place talent when Heath took over as coach last year, just as Arkansas did when he became its coach back in 2002. So what's different, other than Heath's latitude and longitude?

"There's more teams, and more good teams," he says. "Sometimes you have a league that's a physical league or an athletic league. But this league has a little of everything. I think that's what makes it unique."

The Big East is entering its fourth season as a 16-team conference, but its stature continues to grow. Already part of the only league to be awarded eight NCAA Tournament bids in a season—which happened two of the past three years—Big East members believe they might crack double figures in 2009.

Why? Why does Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim, who was around in the days of Ewing, Mullin and the Orange's own Pearl Washington, declare this year's Big East "is the best it's ever been"? Why does Villanova assistant Doug West, who played for the Wildcats during the league's late-'80s glory era, chuckle nervously for nearly a half-minute when asked to discuss the challenges of competing in the modern Big East? Why does Louisville coach Rick Pitino tell the audience at the league's media day, "I think this is the strongest league in the history of college basketball"?

In a word: *volume*. "We've had good years," Boeheim



44 Big East This year's version could be the best league ever

The conference is so strong from top to (almost) bottom, it could wind up breaking its own record with double-digit NCAA Tournament bids

says. "But we've never had this many good teams."

In the offseason, most other leagues were punished severely by graduation, early entry and the one-and-done phenomenon. The Big East held on to such talents as Connecticut center Hasheem Thabeet, Louisville forward Earl Clark and Pitt forward Sam Young. All got some love from the mock draft lists that often seduce young players into turning pro prematurely.

Of 26 players selected to the all-Big East teams last season, 18 are back. It may be more telling that 23 of the top 30 scorers, 15 of the top 20 rebounders and nine of the top 10 in assists return. Nine teams won at least 20 games last year; on average, they lost one starter each.

"We're a pretty good basketball team, and we're picked ninth," West

Virginia coach Bob Huggins says. "When I was in Conference USA, it was pretty good. And I've been in the Big 12 for a year. On the outside of the Big East, you're saying, 'Aw, it isn't what they say it is.' Then you get in it—it's more than what they say it is."

As Heath can tell you—as those who've visited South Florida's bandbox-style home court can tell you—the challenge of playing in the Big East goes beyond the 10 or 11 teams that either expect or hope to compete for NCAA bids. The teams scrambling to escape the cellar have improved their recruiting and might need only experience to gain on the lead pack.

"Not only the talent is there, but when the coaches are doing their scouting they're able to make their guys aware of what I'm capable of," Pitt's Young says. "That's the main thing that makes the Big East powerful: The Big East coaches are some of the smartest coaches in college basketball."

However challenging it may be when trapped in that cauldron, if the Big East is to live up to its self-congratulation, it must excel in nonconference games. Last year the league won 73.7 percent of

its regular-season games against outside opponents, well short of the 77.1 percent recorded by the ACC. Big East members were under .500 against opponents from other BCS leagues.

If the Big East wants 10 teams in the NCAA Tournament, it will have to inflict the same level of misery on outsiders as it does internally. And even then, inviting nearly one-sixth of the field from one conference is not likely to be embraced across the rest of the nation.

"You've got to look at it as two leagues, two really good basketball leagues," says ESPN analyst Fran Fraschilla. "So it's not beyond the realm of possibility to think they would have eight, nine or 10 teams that would be worthy of the NCAAs."

"Fans and the media always are looking for things to whine about, and this would certainly be one of them. But I'm a big believer the basketball committee looks at each team on its own merits and not whether it comes out of a weak or strong league."

—Mike DeCourcy

OUR PICKS

1. Connecticut
2. Louisville
3. Pitt
4. Notre Dame
5. Marquette
6. Syracuse
7. Villanova
8. Georgetown
9. West Virginia
10. Cincinnati
11. Providence
12. Seton Hall
13. Rutgers
14. DePaul
15. St. John's
16. South Florida



MY TURN

**Denny Crum, Louisville coach
Won 675 games and two NCAA titles
with the Cardinals**

Louisville has an excellent team coming back. Their conference is double tough. I think that will help them in the long run. I don't see any apparent weaknesses in their team; they should be pretty good defensively and try to be a lot more uptempo, so hopefully they can get some easy baskets in transition. You only need to get one or two a game to make a difference in winning and losing sometimes.

ALL-AMERICAN SPOTLIGHT

45

BLAKE GRIFFIN: a graceful banger

6-10 sophomore forward, Oklahoma

Griffin has the athleticism borne of natural ability and a lifetime of playing sports. He runs the court with power and agility. All of which is true of dozens of players at the Division I level. But none of them has the size of the Oklahoma sophomore.

"It's very rare to see someone that's a legit 6-10, 252 pounds as graceful as he is," says Sooners coach Jeff Capel. "Yet he's still incredibly powerful. He's fast, he's quick, he's explosive. He also can play with finesse. I haven't seen anyone in person like that."

Don't take just his coach's word for it.

"He has a lot of different components to his game," says Texas center Connor Atchley. "Big, strong, rebounds, can dribble, and he has a great feel for the game."

Griffin averaged 9.1 rebounds to go with 14.7 points last season—the best output for a Sooners freshman since Wayman Tisdale in 1983—and even more is expected of him this year. "He's gotten bigger and more explosive," Capel says.

During high school in Oklahoma City, Griffin won rebounding battles largely because he was so big. He still has a size advantage in most games, but he has refined his technique. The team works constantly on rebounding in the bubble drill, in which balls bounce off of a plastic bubble on the rim. Nobody knows where the ball is going to come out, and the drill is meant to teach players to fight for rebounds.

As impressive as his physical tools are, it's his relentlessness that makes Griffin a top rebounder.

"You find a man, find two men, block them out, keep them away from the ball," Griffin says. "Sometimes it's kind of a guess where the ball's coming off, but a lot of times you can tell. Then you just be relentless and go after it and not stop until you have it or your team has it."

— Matt Crossman

(46)

Every mid-major believes it can be the next Gonzaga

No one can duplicate the formula that turned the Zags from a solid mid-major into a national power, but from Wright State to Western Kentucky to right there in the West Coast Conference, fans and administrators believe their programs can. Gonzaga took advantage of its remote geography, its supportive community, an underappreciated talent base and its own zeal to invest in success. The Zags are like Mark Cuban: as fortunate as they are brilliant.



47 BILLY DONOVAN

came back last year, and now Florida is coming with him

After winning consecutive NCAA championships—and after Donovan briefly decided to leave Florida for the Orlando Magic—the 2007-08 Gators became one of the few defending champions that weren't invited to defend. With sophomores Nick Calathes and Chandler Parsons advancing toward stardom, this team will be the SEC's best again.

(48)

Some games are bigger than others

The three most important nonleague games on the schedule:

1. North Carolina vs. Michigan State, December 3, Detroit's Ford Field

2. Connecticut vs. Gonzaga, December 20, Seattle's KeyArena

3. UCLA at Texas, December 4, Austin's Erwin Center

49 JON BROCKMAN

deserves your support

He's like the Libertarian Party candidate. Not enough people know about Washington's power forward, so it doesn't matter whether he can do the job. Brockman should have spent a few years playing with Martell Webster and Spencer Hawes. But those two played a combined one season for the Huskies. Although Brockman has been overwhelming for two years running—16.0 points, 10.6 rebounds—he hasn't been to the NCAAs since he was a freshman. It's time for a change.

(50)

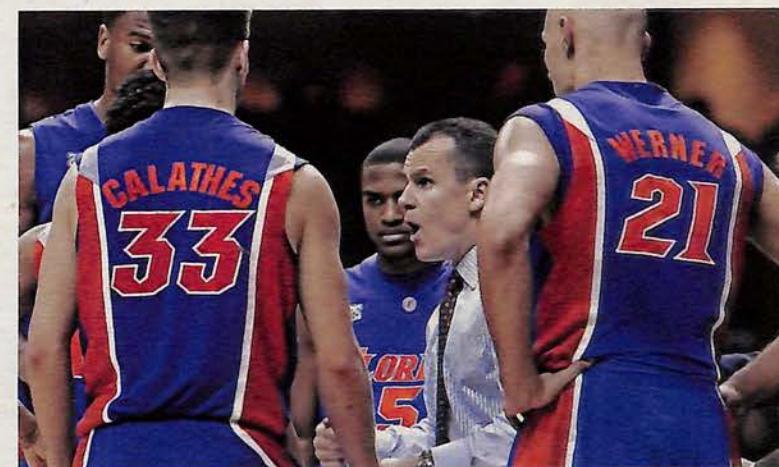
When the game is on the line, anybody can win—or lose

Lots of amateur analysts felt like geniuses after missed free throws from Derrick Rose and Chris Douglas-Roberts helped cost Memphis the NCAA championship. After all, hadn't people been saying all season foul shooting would wreck the Tigers? Here's the thing, though: Those guys were 71.2 percent shooters. If they'd made 71.2 percent of their free throws down the stretch against Kansas, they'd have rings now. When West Virginia's Joe Alexander faced a one-and-one to break a Sweet 16 tie against Xavier with 14 seconds left, he missed. Alexander ordinarily shot 81.4 percent from the line. With the game on the line, percentages are irrelevant. Anyone can miss.

51

K-State's **FRANK MARTIN** will get to show his stuff. Or not.

Kansas State's decision to hire Martin in the spring of 2007 received worse reviews than Nights In Rodanthe. But that decision ensured the arrival of Michael Beasley, who became an All-American and led the Wildcats to the NCAA Tournament. With Beasley gone to the NBA—along with forward Bill Walker—Martin is rebuilding with one returning starter, guard Jacob Pullen. It's not going to be easy, but if Martin wins, it'll be impressive.



52 PAC-10

Forget USC-UCLA—
California's best rivalry might
be the one by the Bay

The Lopez brothers are gone at Stanford. So is the coach.

The Cardinal's Bay Area rival, Cal, is in a similar situation: under new leadership and without stud forward Ryan Anderson.

Pac-10 titles might not come right away, but Stanford's hiring of a Duke assistant (Johnny Dawkins) and Cal's decision to bring in Mike Montgomery—who built up Stanford basketball for 18 years before a stint in the NBA—has both teams buzzing.

"What Coach Dawkins says a lot is, 'Don't let Stanford beat Stanford,'" says senior forward Lawrence Hill. "If we go out here and don't play well, we usually do it to ourselves because of a lack of effort."

Over at Cal, the idea of Montgomery coaching the Bears takes some getting used to. Even for him. "One time (at practice), he said, 'All right red ... and we have blue and gold,'" says Cal forward Jamal Boykin. "When you've been coaching for so long with one color, I guess we can give him a pass on that."

— Matt Crossman

OUR PICKS

1. UCLA
2. USC
3. Arizona State
4. Washington
5. Washington State
6. Arizona
7. California
8. Stanford
9. Oregon
10. Oregon State

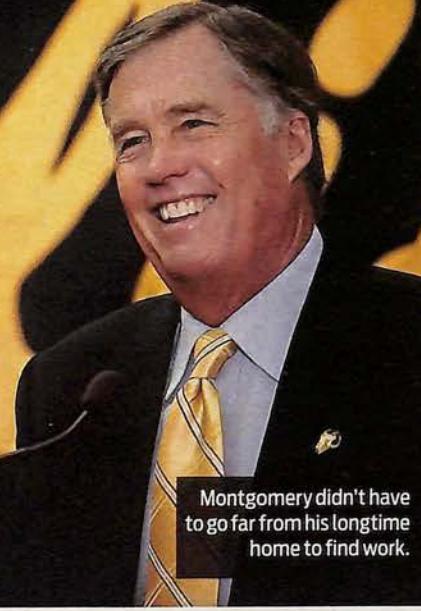
MY TURN
Gail Goodrich,
UCLA guard
Member of SN's all-time Bruins team

When Ben Howland got the UCLA job, I called him and welcomed him to the Bruin family and expressed how happy I was. I'd seen how hard his teams played at Pitt and knew he'd rejuvenate UCLA basketball, which he has. This is another really good team. They have Final Four experience and some really good freshmen, especially Jrue Holiday. They have the quickness to play fast, but they'll also slow it down and make teams work for everything.

(53)

Baylor has put the past in the past

It may be a while before the only parentheses attached to Baylor involve the Bears' win-loss record. But more often lately it is Baylor (21-11 last season) rather than Baylor (the school where Carlton Dotson killed his former teammate, Patrick Dennehy). New coach Scott Drew lifted the Bears from eight wins his first season to last year's NCAA Tournament bid, and that team's top five scorers return. This season could become the program's best in 61 years.



Montgomery didn't have to go far from his longtime home to find work.

(57)

The Cornhusker State should shift its attention to a winter sport

In the last 10 full seasons, Nebraska went 86-41 (.677 winning percentage) in football. Meanwhile, up the freeway in Omaha, the Creighton basketball team went 228-93 (.710)—with 10 consecutive 20-win seasons, seven NCAA tourney berths and three NIT trips—in that span.

And this season, coach Dana Altman should have one of his best teams yet. The Missouri Valley Conference power is loaded in the backcourt with Josh Dotzler, P'Allen Stinnett and Booker Woodfox.

May we suggest a change to the Bluejay State?

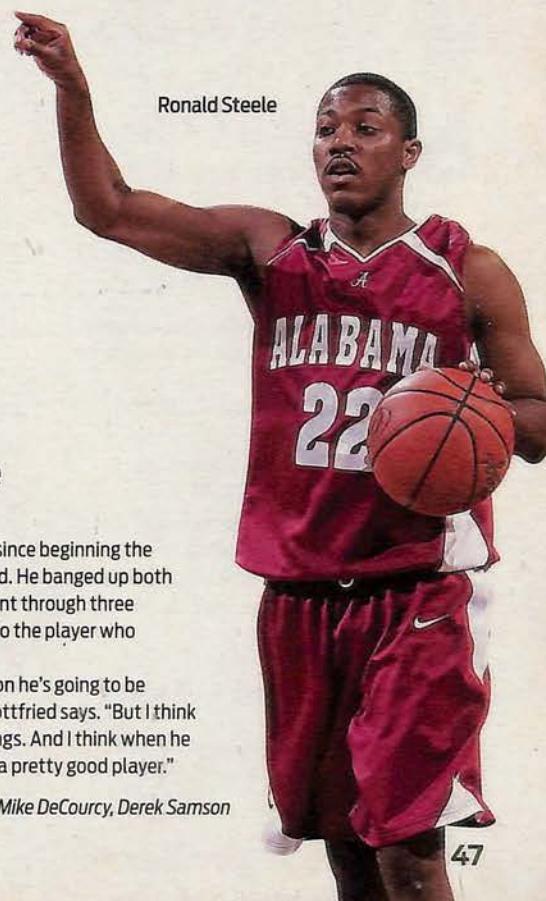
(58)

Not all the beauty is on offense

To score on our projected Final Four, you have to get past these guys:

1. North Carolina: SF Marcus Ginyard
2. Connecticut: C Hasheem Thabeet
3. Louisville: SG Jerry Smith
4. Gonzaga: PG Jeremy Pargo

Ronald Steele

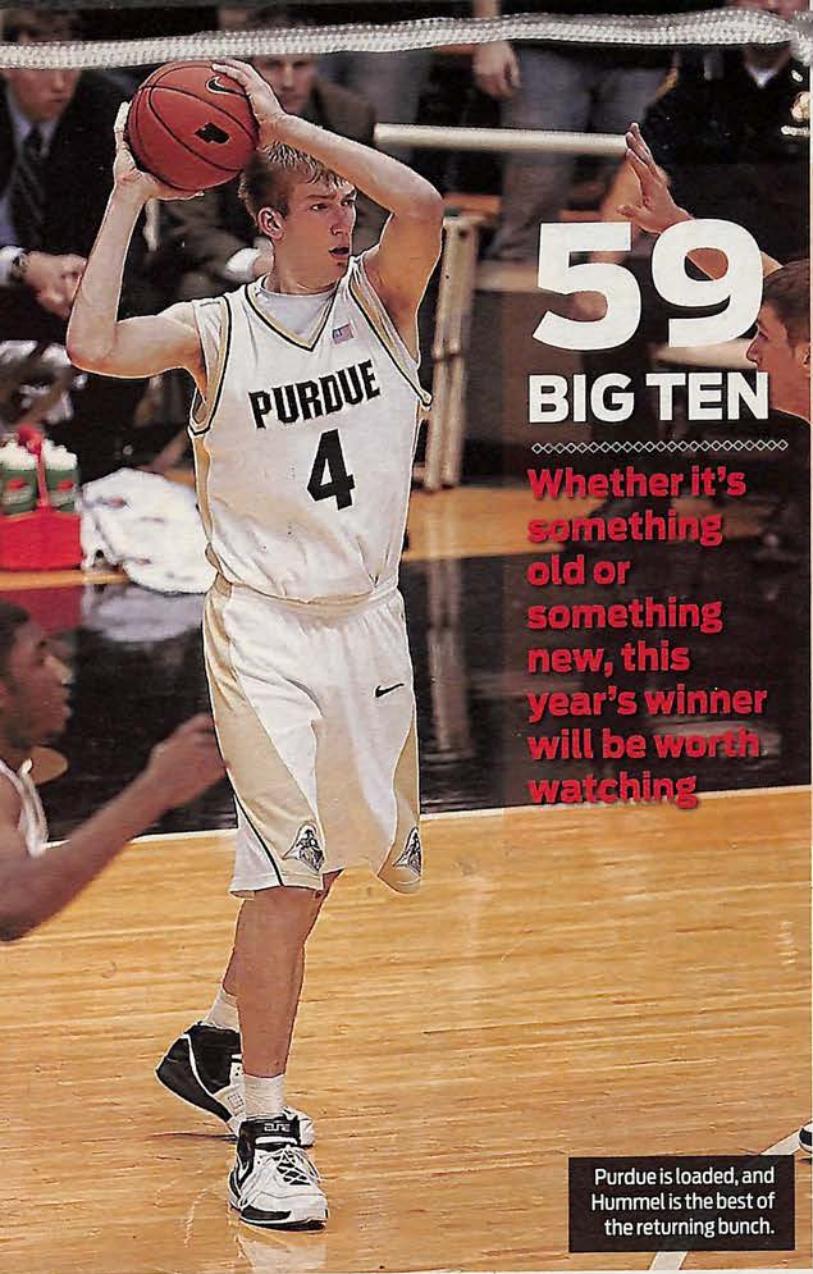


56 Ronald Steele can be Ronald Steele again

Now a senior at Alabama, Steele hasn't been the same since beginning the 2006-07 season as our preseason All-American point guard. He banged up both knees, tried to play through it and struggled terribly. He went through three surgeries, then redshirted, hoping time would restore him to the player who averaged 14.3 points as a sophomore.

"I don't know that on Day 1 of the first game of the season he's going to be playing like an All-American. Maybe he will," coach Mark Gottfried says. "But I think it just takes a little bit of time to get back in the flow of things. And I think when he does and he begins to feel comfortable, we're going to see a pretty good player."

Contributing: Matt Crossman, Mike DeCourcy, Derek Samson



59 BIG TEN

Whether it's something old or something new, this year's winner will be worth watching

Purdue is loaded, and Hummel is the best of the returning bunch.

OUR PICKS

1. Michigan State
2. Purdue
3. Wisconsin
4. Ohio State
5. Minnesota
6. Michigan
7. Illinois
8. Northwestern
9. Penn State
10. Iowa
11. Indiana

This season's Big Ten is a race between a team reaching center stage (Purdue) and a team already there (Michigan State).

Purdue returns its MVP (guard Keaton Grant) and leading scorer (guard E'Twaun Moore), the Big Ten's defensive player of the year (guard Chris Kramer) and

the only returning All-Big Ten player (forward Robbie Hummel). Michigan State has depth, experience and a top coach.

With so many returning stars, Hummel believes the Boilermakers are on the cusp of a huge season after a breakout 2007-08 in which they won 25 games. "Winning the Big Ten would be a great encore for our team," he says.

Michigan State has its eyes on a bigger prize. Center Goran Suton says the team has added incentive because the Final Four will be in nearby Detroit. If that's not enough to fire up the big man, coach Tom Izzo will step in. "He definitely pushes you," Suton says. "I love playing for him."

— Matt Crossman



MY TURN
Gene Keady,
Purdue coach
Six-time national
coach of the year

Purdue is going to be very, very good. I'd hate to say they'll be a Final Four team because they don't have a bona fide center yet. They have a couple in the making: (JaJuan) Johnson and (Nemanja) Calasan. They've got a few guys who can shoot. They all can handle the ball, and that's neat. You probably saw that Robbie Hummel was picked to be the Big Ten MVP. They've got a lot of good things going for them. I really like their balance. I thought they were the most fun team to watch in the Big Ten last year. That was maybe because we didn't expect as much from them.

61 There's somebody to do the dirty work for RAYMAR MORGAN

In high school, Morgan treated rebounding like a plate of cauliflower. He's gotten only a little better at it since he arrived at Michigan State, even though coach Tom Izzo believes rebounding is the key to eternal life (or championships). It's OK now because freshman power forward Delvon Roe lives to control the baseline and scrape up available rebounds. Morgan will be free to do what he loves, which is attack the basket from the perimeter. They were meant for each other.



(62)
If you had after three seasons in the 'When will JOHN CALIPARI bolt Memphis?' pool, your ticket has been worthless for nearly six years

60 CLARK KELLOGG is the new Billy Packer

Meet college basketball's new lead analyst on CBS—Clark "Special K" Kellogg, who was the 1982 Big Ten MVP while at Ohio State:

SN: In replacing Billy Packer as the analyst for the Final Four, you're filling the shoes of a ... Is lightning rod a fair word?

KELLOGG: I prefer legend. Nobody else has done it on network television as an analyst. I know there are some detractors who think Billy was a lightning rod. He was always very sharp in his analysis and not afraid to say what he was looking at or what he felt. Billy has been as good as there's ever been at breaking down the game.

SN: Word association: Indiana University basketball.

KELLOGG: In transition but headed in the right direction.

SN: If you want to win the championship, you have to beat ...

KELLOGG: North Carolina.

SN: No pause at all?

KELLOGG: None. That's based on who they've got back and the coaches—that's all you can base it on at this point.

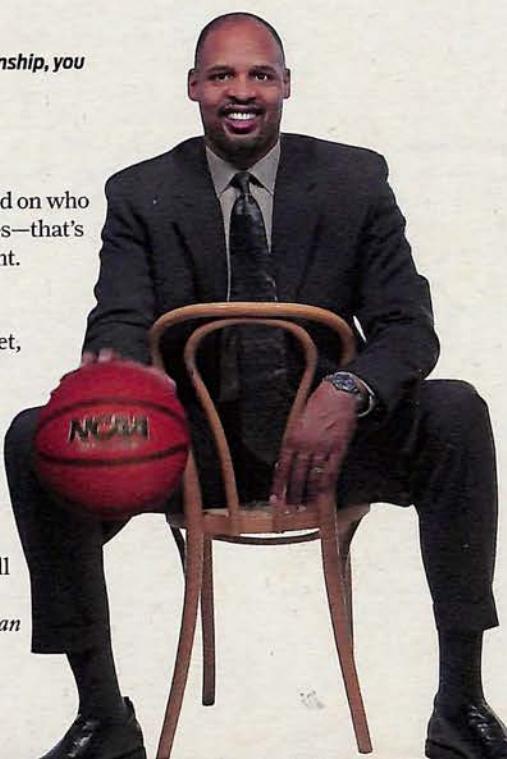
SN: Player of the year.

KELLOGG: Hasheem Thabeet, UConn.

SN: Tyler Hansbrough's legacy.

KELLOGG: There's still an unwritten piece because they could win the national championship, and that would add to it. I'll just say, full throttle, all the time.

— Matt Crossman



(63)

The Maui Invitational is in Maui

Take it from Dayton's Brian Gregory, coach of the 2003 champion:

"When I went over as an assistant, I went body surfing. It's much different as a head coach. I told our (sports information director), the only times I saw the sun was driving back from the games in his convertible."

"It's just an unbelievable three days. Every minute, the intensity of those games is great. You have to mix in the fun for the guys because under that intensity—every game is a battle—all that time away from those games the guys spend together, it can really act as a great springboard for building your team for the rest of the year."

"When you go out there, everything is first-class. You do feel, as a program, like you're right where you want to be."

"That is a place I'd like to vacation one day."

(64)

Twelve more inches could change the game a lot—or maybe just a little

With the NCAA rules committee moving the 3-point line back a foot to 20 feet, 9 inches, there certainly will be a huge impact on how the season develops. Right?

"Some people say it's not going to have any effect at all," says Kentucky coach Billy Gillispie.

OK, so nobody knows for sure what will happen. The number of 3s attempted has almost doubled since the line was drawn in 1986-87. The committee moved it back this season

Five guys not named
STEPHEN CURRY
who'll love the line:

1. **Chad Toppert**, New Mexico
45.7 percent career 3-point shooter
2. **Garrison Carr**, American
42.2 percent
3. **Kyle McAlarney**, Notre Dame
44.2 percent
4. **Josh Young**, Drake
38.2 percent
5. **Jon Scheyer**, Duke
37.5 percent



hoping for better spacing on the court and possibly more drives to the goal. That could lead to an epidemic of zone defense.

One thing nearly everyone agrees upon: The great shooters will not be bothered by the new distance, but coaches won't be so eager to see iffy shooters let them fly.

"In general, I don't think it's going to be an earth-shattering thing," says South Carolina coach Darrin Horn, "because I don't think the distance is far enough for that to happen."

A specialty shot?

By **Jon Scheyer, sharpshooter**

For myself, I haven't really noticed a difference. I've shot the ball this preseason as well or even better than I have the past two years. It feels real comfortable, really good.

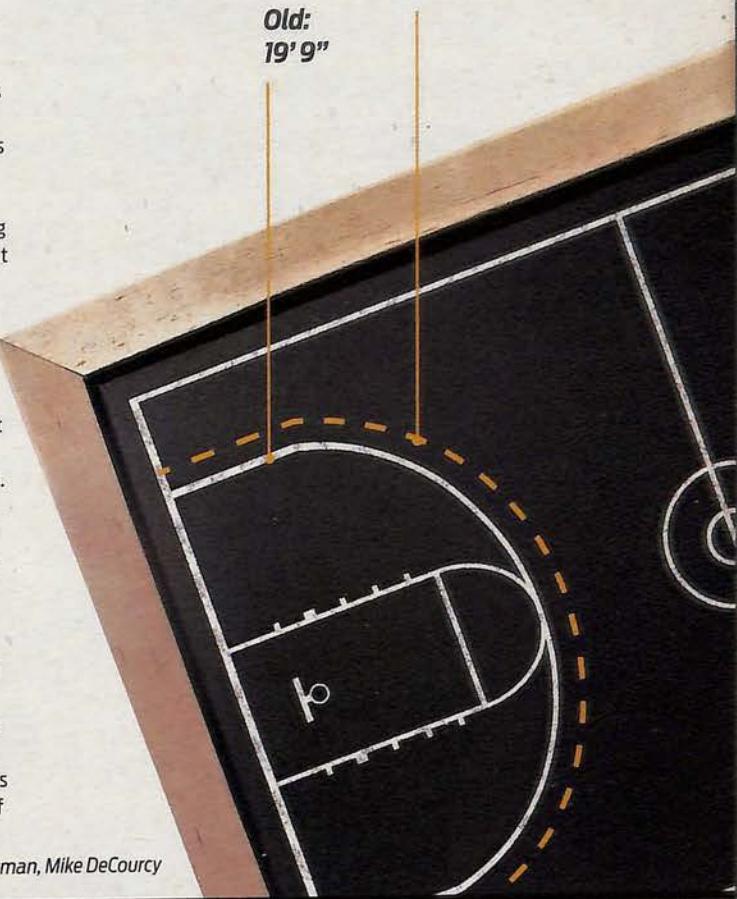
I think where it can come in to play is late in games when you're down three or if the other team knows you need a 3. Sometimes then you have to shoot a little farther, and now that line pushes you back that extra foot, and that's where it may become a little long.

As far as our team, I think we've shot the ball pretty well. I think it could definitely come in to play for us on defense, where you make teams take tougher 3s as opposed to letting them drive by you and get 2s. So the 3 is a little different, and maybe it becomes more of a specialty this year.

Contributing: Ken Bradley, Matt Crossman, Mike DeCourcy

New:
20'9"

Old:
19'9"



SCHEYER: SUSAN WALSH/AP

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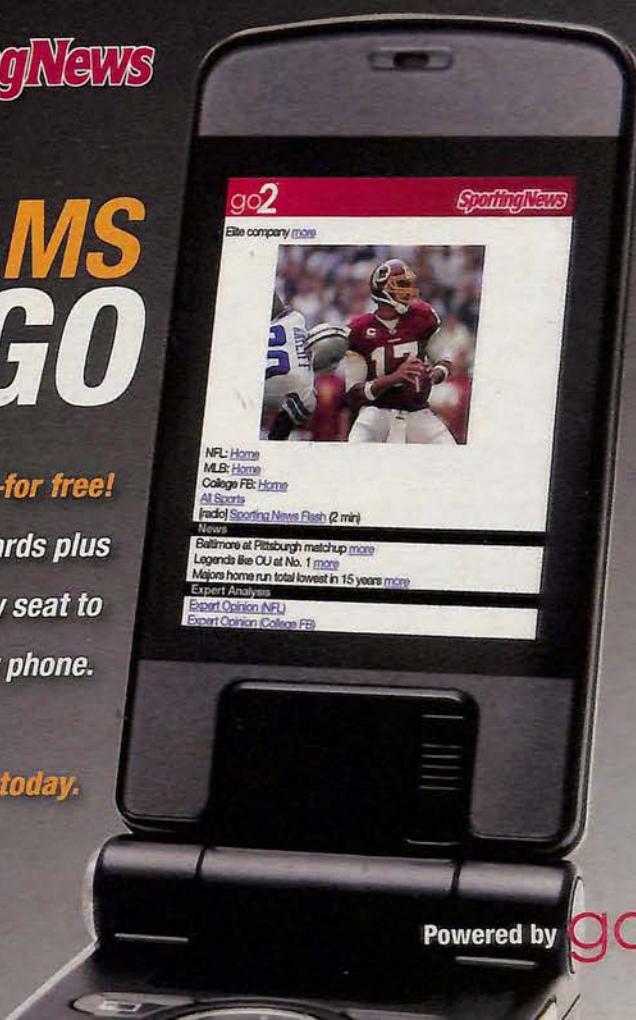
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65

Don't worry—we didn't
forget about the bracket

It's never too early for our tourney picks





CAROLINA

BASKETBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

April 4, 6: Detroit

UConn

MIDWEST
Indianapolis

1 Louisville

16 Stephen F. Austin/Radford

8 Washington

9 Virginia Tech

5 Davidson

12 Kentucky

4 Purdue

13 South Alabama

6 Oklahoma

11 West Virginia

3 USC

14 Cal State Northridge

7 Syracuse

10 Saint Joseph's

2 Duke

15 Oakland

1 UConn

16 Morgan State

8 Temple

9 Alabama

5 Wake Forest

12 Southern Illinois

4 Arizona State

13 Miami (Ohio)

6 Saint Mary's

11 Clemson

3 Memphis

14 Cornell

7 Baylor

10 Georgetown

2 Michigan State

15 Jacksonville

In Texas, football
is the biggest
thing in town.
It's not even close

Sporting News Conversation:
College football's
Lone Star State QBs

Texas high schools have been churning out great quarterbacks for years, and it's more than just coincidence. Six BCS league starters explain why there are so many Texans under center.



Jarrett Lee
LSU

"I think maybe coaches give you a closer look as a quarterback because you're from Texas."



Colt McCoy
Texas

"From the time you're born until you get to high school, you're surrounded by football."



Christian Ponder
Florida State

"Football's a religion there."



Todd Reesing
Kansas

"It was an amazing experience."



Jevan Snead
Mississippi

"There's so much great football in Texas."



Matthew Stafford
Georgia

"If you're not from there, you don't have a chance at relating to it."



Lee says it's all football all the time in Texas. Not many players participate in another sport.

According to college football tradition, Florida has the fast guys and the Midwest brings the big blockers. The great quarterbacks, though, they belong to Texas, as much a part of the state as the Alamo and the yellow rose.

The roster of Lone Star State quarterbacks stretches back seven decades, from Davey O'Brien to Vince Young, from Slingin' Sammy to Dandy Don and all the rest. The run has continued in 2008, with throwers from the University of Texas' Colt McCoy, a Heisman Trophy favorite, to Georgia's Matthew Stafford, the potential No. 1 pick in April's NFL draft, leading the charge.

For at least one week in October, 17 of Division I-A's top 100 quarterbacks in pass efficiency had played high school ball in Texas. On November 1, seven of the top 15 teams in the BCS rankings were led by Texans. *Sporting News*' Dave Curtis caught up with six of those guys—McCoy, Stafford, Florida State's Christian Ponder, LSU's Jarrett Lee, Kansas' Todd Reesing and Mississippi's Jevan Snead—to discuss the magic of Texas.

SN: So, what's the deal with all the good quarterback play from you Texas guys?

McCoy: It's the popularity. From the time you're born until you get to high school, you're surrounded by football. With all those kids, and all those athletes and the coaches down there, you're bound to have a lot of good quarterbacks out of there.

Ponder: Football's a religion there. The high school football is so intense. It's pretty much all we do. You're going year-round, between 7-on-7, the offseason and, of course, the season. You win a championship in Texas, it's 16 games. That's a lot of football.

Lee: Those guys are right. Football is it for a lot of guys. You don't see a lot of football players playing two and three sports. Some guys do, and maybe some guys run track. But everybody focuses on it all the time. We all grew up around it. They've made movies and written books about it. You can't help but get wrapped up in it and want to play.

SN: But there are good players, good teams and good environments everywhere, right? What separates Texas?

Ponder: The things that stick out for me are the stadiums and the facilities. Some of the places you play in high school are huge. And you go to some schools and they have these indoor facilities. We don't even have an indoor facility at Florida State. I remember when the Dallas Cowboys borrowed Southlake Carroll's indoor facility to have guys work out. It just shows you how much money gets pumped into some of those programs.

Snead: It's the coaching. Those guys take their jobs so seriously. They're always driving all over the place to go to clinics and find out new offenses and all that. My coach, Chad Morris, was big into fundamentals and conditioning. We had a pretty intense offseason, and when I got to college, I was really surprised by the intensity of that part. We had a good-sized weight room, and it was one of the biggest around when it was built. I felt like I had an advantage with lifting when I got to school.

Reesing: When I got to Kansas, a lot of the guys in my class were watching film for the first time. We watched film almost every day in high school. And the coaches were right there with us, showing us different coverages and how to make reads. I don't think guys from other places have that kind of coaching and experience before college.

Stafford: Most of the guys from other states I talked to had a head coach, offensive coordinator and defensive coordinator in high school. We had almost as many coaches there as we do at Georgia. Every position on our offensive line had its own coach. So many people want to be involved, and a lot of them played at least in high school and some in college. We got so much individual attention. It was great, and it really helped me when I got to Georgia.



Reesing is used to being run down from behind—in high school, it was by little kids wanting his autograph.

SN: What kind of pressure is there on starting quarterbacks in Texas high schools?

REESING: Well, you're the big star. You get recognized when you go out. And everybody's paying attention to what you do and what you say. It's similar to what I'm going through at Kansas as far as the pressure. Everybody's just so into that team. The cheerleaders and the other students are decorating your locker and making signs about you and putting them near your house. Little kids have shirts and photos and are chasing you around to get your autograph. It was an amazing experience.

STAFFORD: I remember my senior year, a reporter from Atlanta, Carter Strickland, came out to do a story about what it was like at our high school. So we're walking down the halls of the school, it's a Thursday or a Friday, and I look up, and there's a guy walking down the halls with a Superman shirt on. Except where the big "S" is, the shirt's got a 7, which was my number. Of course, on the day the reporter's there, this guy comes walking down with a shirt like that to support me. It was like that every game week.

SNEAD: The people in Stephenville backed us all the way. We had really good teams my junior and senior years, and we always had great support. You'd go out, and people would always be talking about the team and telling you what a good job you were doing. The best thing was that you could get away with more stuff in high school. You didn't see as much from the defenses, and our offense was pretty good, so you could be a little more flashy and have a little fun. That made people like you even more.

SN: What makes football so important to the people who live in Texas?

McCoy: A lot of the small towns, the kids there are too far away to go see the Cowboys or even watch UT or A&M. The high school is right there for them. On game days, in town there's nothing open because everybody's at the game. You see little kids in elementary school, and they don't want to grow up to be a star in the NFL. They just want to be a really good player in high school.

LEE: I'm not real sure, but you have to remember that so many guys, the dads and the uncles, played the game when they were growing up. So the towns, especially the small towns, a lot of time you're playing where your dad played. Sometimes, your dad is a coach, like mine was. And they all follow the team everywhere. You drive down the street, and you see the writing on the store windows. *Gone to the game*. And it's normal. It's just always there, from the moment you know what football is.

SN: How close is *Friday Night Lights* to reality?

McCoy: That's how football is in West Texas. Permian was such a good team, and that was a little bit bigger school than where I went at Jim Ned High. The similar thing was how it's so much more than the football team. You've got the cheerleaders, the band, the school board and the boosters that have their money supporting the program. It's a lot like UT, just a much smaller scale.

SNEAD: Saw the movie, and I think they exaggerated a lot of it. The one thing that was real similar for me was that you really do develop a bond with the other guys you play with. I remember hanging out with my teammates all the time, and you knew a lot about their lives. But the rest of it was a little over the top. I never got a whipped cream bikini, for example (like in *Varsity Blues*).

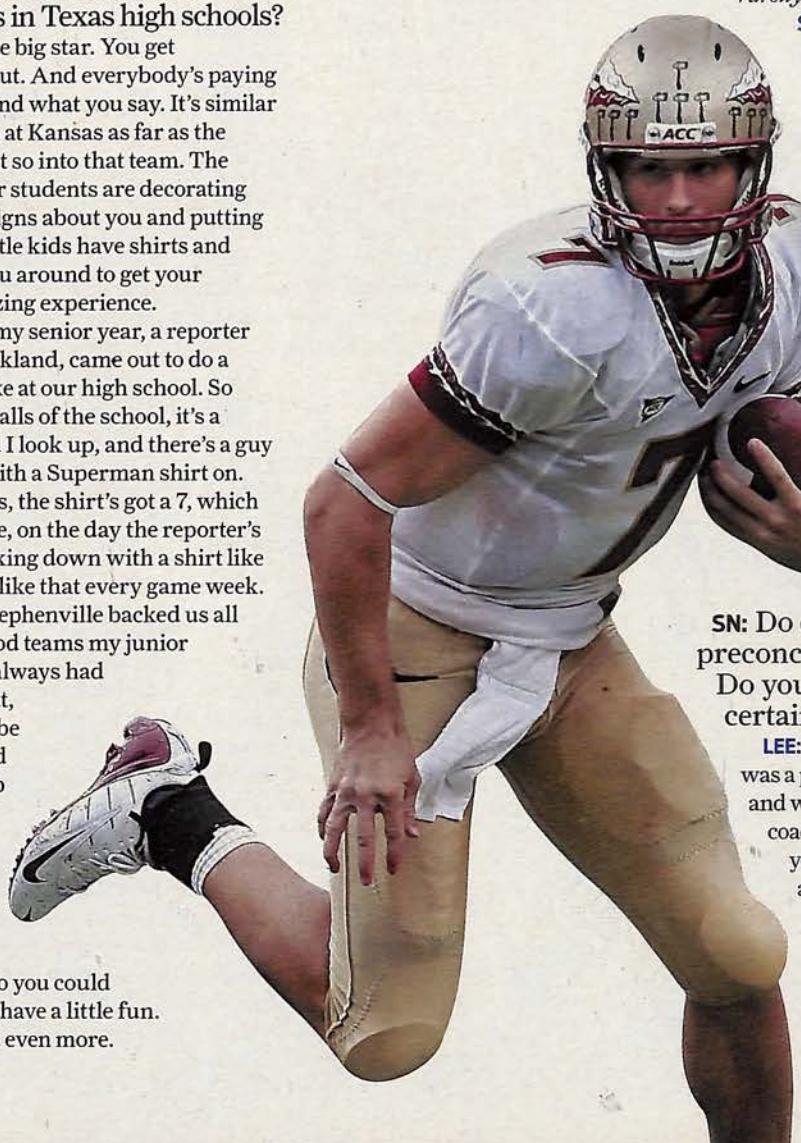
STAFFORD: My buddy's dad played out in Odessa, and he said the movie was exactly the way things were out there. I played near Dallas, so it wasn't a small town like in the movies. But Doak Walker went to Highland Park, and Bobby Layne, too, so there's been a following there for a long time. A lot of grandparents and older folks would come out to the games, even if they didn't know anybody on the team real well. So it was a school in a city, but it was the same kind of atmosphere.

PONDER: It was a little different for me because we had a couple of high schools within about 5 miles of each other. So the attention in the media kind of got split up between the schools. But when I watched the scenes with the pep rallies, I remembered how electric the gym was when we would have a rally before a game. That part was pretty realistic for me.

SN: Do coaches and other players have preconceived notions of Texas quarterbacks?

Do you find that people expect you to play a certain way?

LEE: I'm not really sure. Maybe they expected that I was a pretty good player, maybe that I could throw well and would learn the offense pretty fast. I think maybe coaches give you a closer look as a quarterback because you're from Texas and there's so much good coaching and so many good players to come out of there.



Ponder says the pep rallies in Texas are something to see.

Stafford doesn't care if people get tired of him talking about his home state.



STAFFORD: Not so much how we're supposed to play but what the culture is like there. When I got to Georgia, and the guys knew I was from Texas, they kind of rolled their eyes. Like, "Listen, we don't want to hear about Texas high school football. We know you're just going to tell us how great it is." It comes up every now and then, and I still think we've got the best.

McCoy: I've never encountered anything like that. I've been around a lot of college guys, and once you get to this level, football is football. Everybody has played their whole lives, and so the expectations are the same.

PONDER: There are only three of us on the team at Florida State, so we've got to stick up for each other. With so many guys from this part of the country, there are always arguments about which state is better. The Florida guys and Georgia guys say, "Well, your state is so big. Of course you've got a lot of players coming out every year." But we've got pretty good players. And we're fast, too. That's what you hear a lot, that the Florida guys are the fast guys. I think the Texas guys can run with them.

SN: A lot of you guys know each other from high school. Has a fraternity developed? Who do you most enjoy watching?

REESING: You know, if we have a night game, and we're flipping around different games during the day, I'm definitely checking out other guys from Texas. It's a little tough sometimes, especially in the Big 12, because we're all competing against each other to win a championship. But I want to see all those guys do well, except against Kansas.

STAFFORD: I'm happy for all those guys. I played against Graham Harrell in high school, and you could tell he was going to be a great one. He's really turned Texas Tech into a winner. Chase Daniel has had a great career at Missouri. Colt, obviously, with what he's doing this year, it's unbelievable.

PONDER: I played in the same district as Chase Daniel at Missouri. I ran around with Matthew Stafford a little bit on the recruiting trail. We played against Stephenville with Jevan Snead. I think we all have a lot of respect for each other. In Texas, you've got a lot of guys, a lot of talented guys, fighting

to be the starting quarterback of the high school team. We've all done that, and we've turned it into something pretty neat at the college level. For guys to watch, it's Chase and Colt for me. I came in the closest contact with them, and I really like to see them succeed.

LEE: I'm probably the youngest guy of that bunch, so I grew up hearing about all these other guys in different parts of the state. When I was in ninth grade, I was hearing about guys like Chase and Colt in the newspapers and on television. I've gotten to know Jevan a little bit, and I went to camps with some of the other guys. You don't realize it, but there are a lot of us out there having pretty great years.

SN: What's something people from outside Texas will never understand about the football there?

McCoy: Just what a big deal the whole thing is.

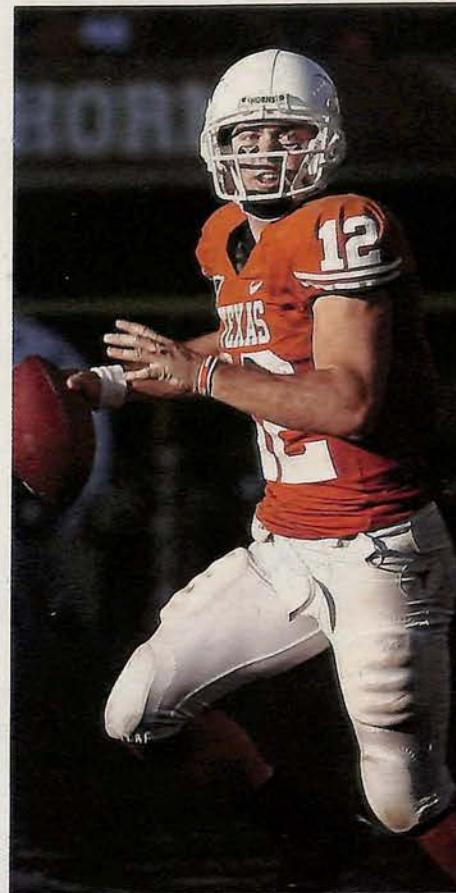
When you're outside of Texas, you can't possibly imagine how much more important football is than anything. Other states, you've got other things going on. In Texas, not to demean anything else, but football is the biggest thing in the town. It's not even close.

REESING: It's what every young boy dreams about. It's not the Cowboys or even playing for the Longhorns or A&M. You want to be a star player at your high school. You're a celebrity.

SNEAD: There's so much great football in Texas. I think the movies and books and the TV show have made people think about it more. If you're from outside Texas, you used to think about the Cowboys or the A&M-Texas game or the Cotton Bowl. Now, maybe you think about high schools. People have always thought about the high schools as No. 1 in Texas.

STAFFORD: The intensity. I'm talking to my teammates, and I tell them I played a game in front of 32,000 people. And they're like, "What?" If you're not from there, you don't have a chance at relating to it. It's hard to comprehend the fan following and the amount of people that really love the sport in high school.

McCoy says playing high school ball in Texas is a lot like playing for UT—just on a smaller scale.



Snead says high school football is more important in Texas than the college game or the NFL.

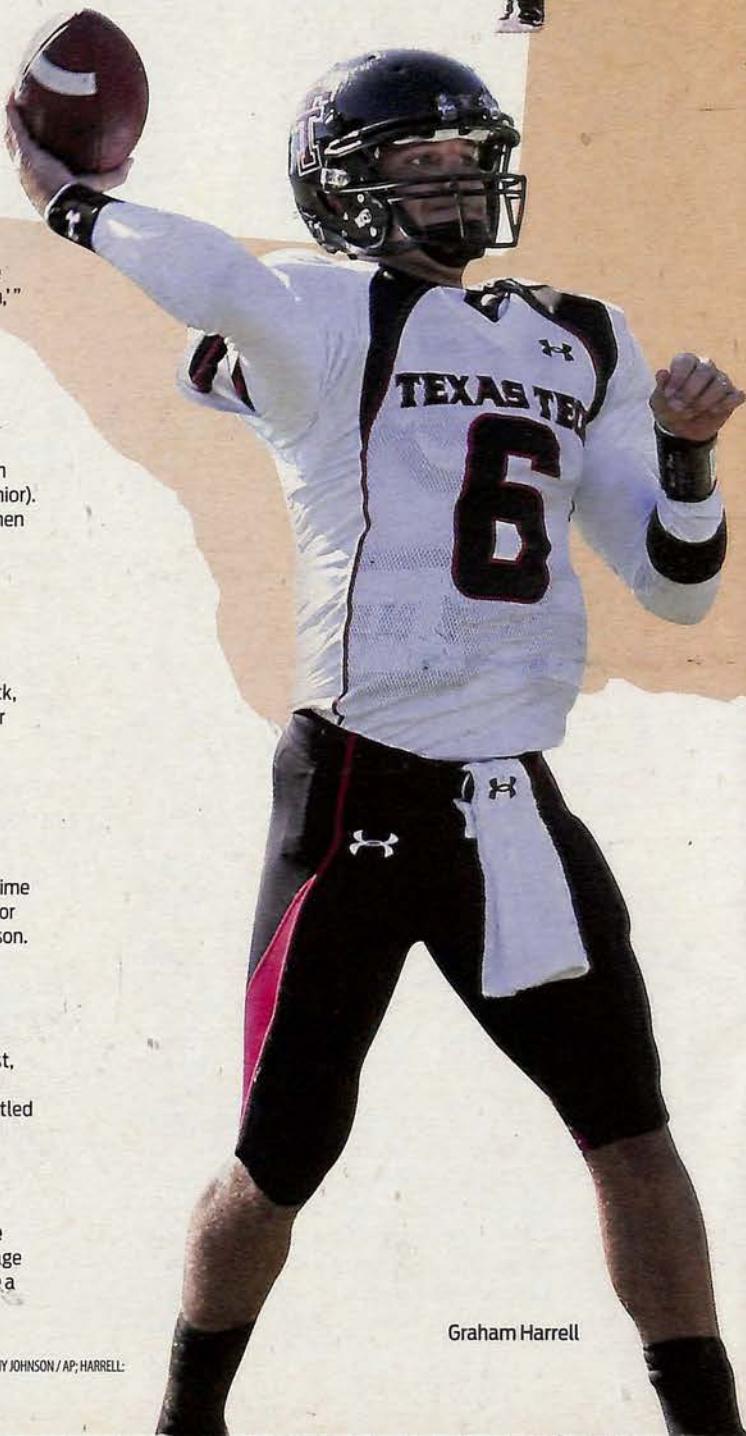
18 college football stars over Texas

It's a big state—one big enough that 15 percent of the starting quarterbacks in Division I-A went to high school there

Chase Daniel



Casey Dick



Graham Harrell

ABILENE

Case Keenum, Houston sophomore

► Conference USA's 2007 freshman of the year was snubbed by BCS teams despite throwing for 48 career TDs at Wylie High. "I think there are some coaches out there now saying, 'We missed it on him,'" says Hugh Sandifer, his coach at Wylie.

ALLEN

Casey Dick, Arkansas senior

► This three-year college starter was a three-star recruit who put up modest numbers compared with those of his prep peers (1,942 passing yards as a senior). Little brother Nathan followed him at Allen High, then to Arkansas.

AUSTIN

Todd Reesing, Kansas junior

► Texas, Texas A&M and Oklahoma all passed on the 2007 second-team All-Big 12 pick, who threw for 41 TDs as a senior. "The competitor you see on TV," says Lake Travis High coach Jeff Dicus, "that's what he was like in high school."

BEDFORD

Trevor Vittatoe, UTEP sophomore

► UTEP beat out VMI and Texas State for this onetime Trinity High star, who set Miners freshman records for passing yards (3,101) and passing TDs (25) last season.

BRENHAM

Jarrett Lee, LSU freshman

► "Recruiting, it was crazy," says coach Glen West, remembering one big-name coach after another dropping by to visit his Brenham High QB. Lee settled on LSU before a 2,384-yard senior season.

COLLEYVILLE

Christian Ponder, Florida State sophomore

► He was a three-year starter at Colleyville Heritage (32 combined TDs as a senior) and is on track to be a three-year starter at FSU.

COPPELL

Daniel Raudabaugh, Miami (Ohio) junior
 ➤ Ben Roethlisberger's alma mater has a knack for finding lightly recruited gems. Raudabaugh, a two-star recruit, will likely wind up a three-year college starter.

COPPERAS COVE**Robert Griffin, Baylor freshman**

➤ Every top program wanted him—in track, not football. Griffin was better known for his feet (U.S. Olympic trials competitor) than his arm (1,356 yards) as a senior at Copperas Cove High. "As far as track, he could have gone anywhere in the country," says his former football coach, Jack Welch.

DALLAS**Matthew Stafford, Georgia junior**

➤ Recruiting gurus were right about the former five-star recruit and future first-round draft pick. He was a star from the start, Highland Park coach Randy Allen recalls: "We were warming up for a playoff game at Texas Stadium. Matthew was a freshman, but I brought him because I knew he would be our starter the next season. Bill Foran, our starter who signed with Purdue, hadn't come out of the dressing room, and Florida offensive coordinator Larry Fedora was there looking, hoping to see Bill. He said to me, 'Is that Bill Foran?' and I said, 'No, that's Matthew Stafford.' ... Fedora thought Matthew was the scholarship quarterback."

ENNIS**Graham Harrell, Texas Tech senior**

➤ Division I-A's reigning passing leader was no slouch at Ennis High, either, throwing for 67 TDs as a senior. "He rewrote the Texas passing marks, and you think, 'Golly, I guess he is pretty special,'" says Sam Harrell, Graham's dad and coach.

FLOWER MOUND**Nick Stephens, Tennessee sophomore**

➤ One of five Lone Star State starting QBs in the SEC, he holds the Flower Mound single-game passing record (440 yards). He took over UT's offense in Game 5.

HUMBLE**Jerrod Johnson, Texas A&M sophomore**

➤ A former Humble High star, he signed with his dad's alma mater as a basketball recruit but switched to football full-time as a freshman.

HURST**Chase Holbrook, New Mexico State senior**

➤ This L.D. Bell High grad started out with Southeastern Louisiana, then followed coach Hal Mumme to New Mexico State, where he threw for an NCAA sophomore-record 4,619 yards.

KATY**Bo Levi Mitchell, SMU freshman**

➤ He's a Katy High legend after leading his team to a 16-0 record, No. 4 national ranking and fifth state title. This two-star recruit has started from Day 1 as a true freshman at SMU.

SAN ANTONIO**Giovanni Vizza, North Texas sophomore**

➤ Like during his days at Alamo Heights High, Vizza is putting up big numbers: In 2007, he led the nation's true freshmen in pass attempts, completions, yards and TDs while playing for Chase Daniel's high school coach, Todd Dodge.

SOUTHLAKE**Chase Daniel, Missouri senior**

➤ The Big 12's reigning offensive player of the year put up big numbers at Carroll High, too—6,042 yards of total offense and 70 TDs as a senior. That landed him offers from Oklahoma State, Texas A&M and Stanford.

STEPHENVILLE**Jevan Snead, Mississippi sophomore**

➤ He committed to Florida, signed with Texas and transferred to Mississippi, where Snead is running the show like he did at Stephenville High (100 TDs in his final two years). "Jevan excels when he's back in the shotgun and able to make plays with his feet," says Chad Morris, his high school coach.

TUSCOLA**Colt McCoy, Texas junior**

➤ The Heisman Trophy front-runner was the talk of his small town (pop. 725) but not recruiters despite finishing his Jim Ned High career with 9,344 yards. (The three-star prospect also punted.) "Stars basically meant 'You're from a small school and you can't have many stars,'" says Brad McCoy, Colt's dad and coach. "It gave him the fuel for getting better."

—Ken Bradley

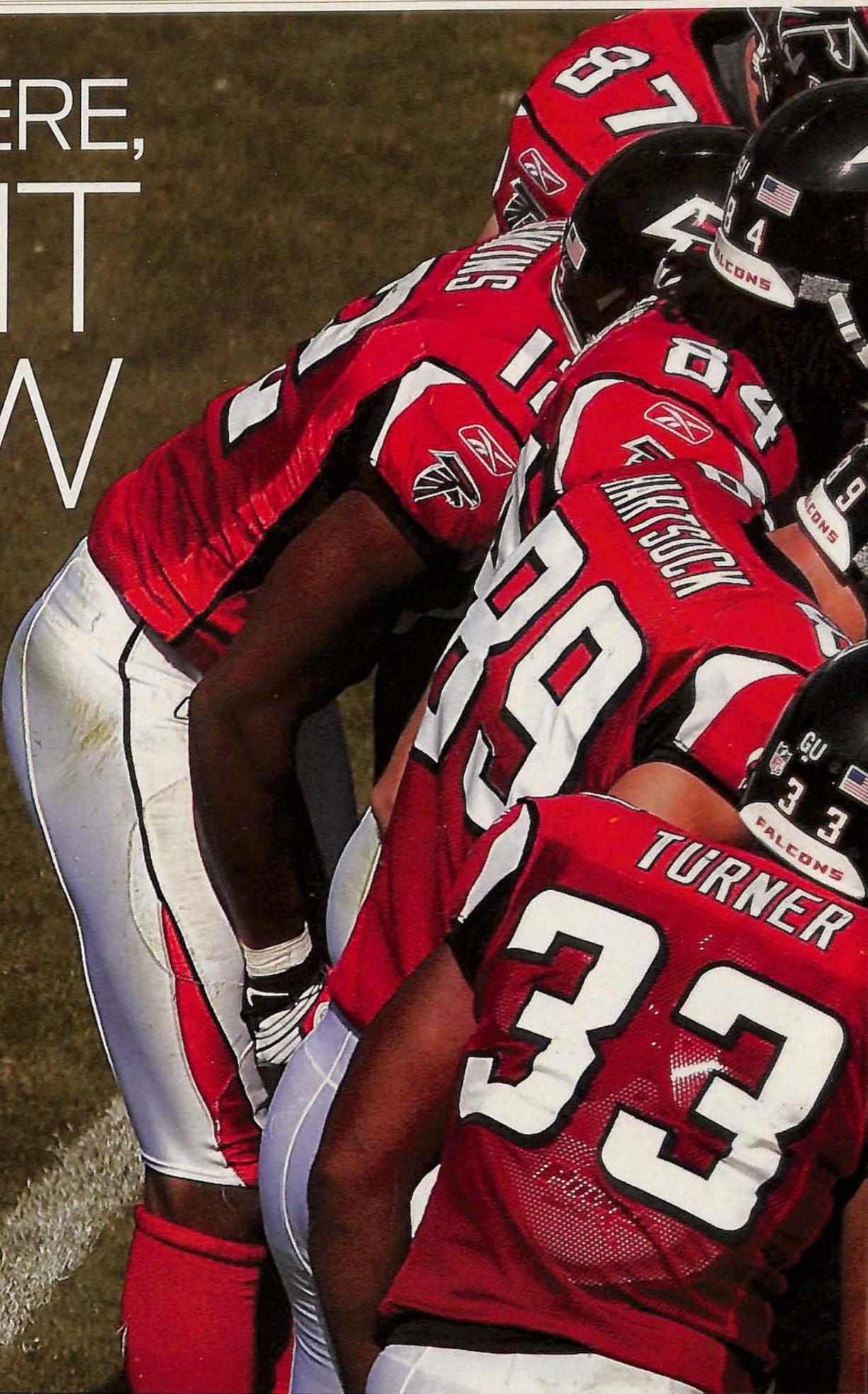


RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW



Rookie quarterback Matt Ryan has taken control of the offense, become the fresh face of a franchise and, maybe the biggest surprise of all, given the Falcons and their fans reason for hope—this season

By Mike Tierney





T

he offense had just been blunted in a pair of three-and-outs, but so what? It was an NFL exhibition, a pseudo-sports event, trivial to all but bettors and borderline players, and an Atlanta Falcons huddle sprinkled with veterans was a circle of chatter.

"Everybody shut up!" the young'un in charge during his virginal pro start admonished before issuing an expletive-laced edict to pick up the pace.

Tenth-year center Todd McClure, stunned by the upbraiding, wondered, "What is this guy thinking?" Fullback Ovie Mughelli, six seasons in, looked around and asked himself, "Is this rookie talking to me?" Wide receiver Roddy White, a fourth-year pro, thought, "Hey, I've been here a lot longer than you."

The battle-scarred had found themselves close to the fire of rookie Matt Ryan, the flip side of the cool customer known since high school as Matty Ice. The fusion of these paradoxical personalities has provided a big-time quarterback to a franchise in need of one.

Now, at midseason, they can call him Matt-thuselah, given how the 23-year-old has hijacked the starting gig and performed as if he's been behind center for centuries.

'WE GAME-PLAN AS IF HE'S AN NFL QUARTERBACK, NOT A ROOKIE QUARTERBACK.'

—Mike Mularkey, Falcons offensive coordinator

"He has matured much quicker than we anticipated," says rookie head coach Mike Smith, whose leadoff draft pick out of Boston College, third overall, arrived as more *finished product* than *assembly required*. And not just as a passer and play-caller. It's Ryan's Pied Piper traits that have wowed Falcons management and won over a roster with 11 30-something players.

"He pulled these guys in the locker room around him as soon as he got here," offensive coordinator Mike Mularkey says.

"Matt is very calculated," says first-year general manager Thomas Dimitroff, "as to when he steps forward as an in-your-face leader and when to step back."

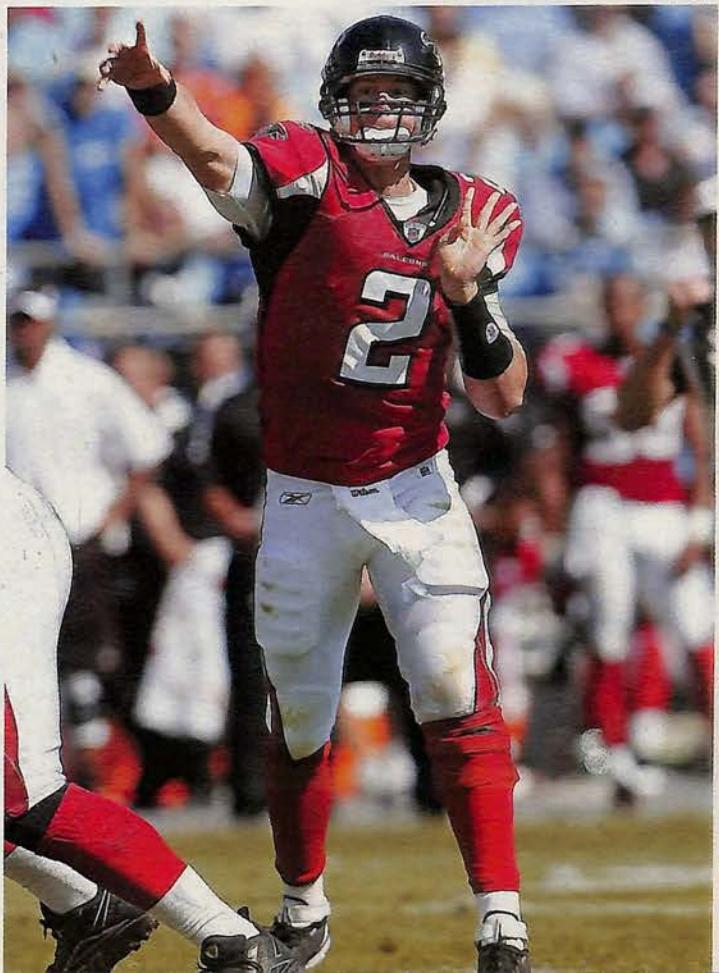
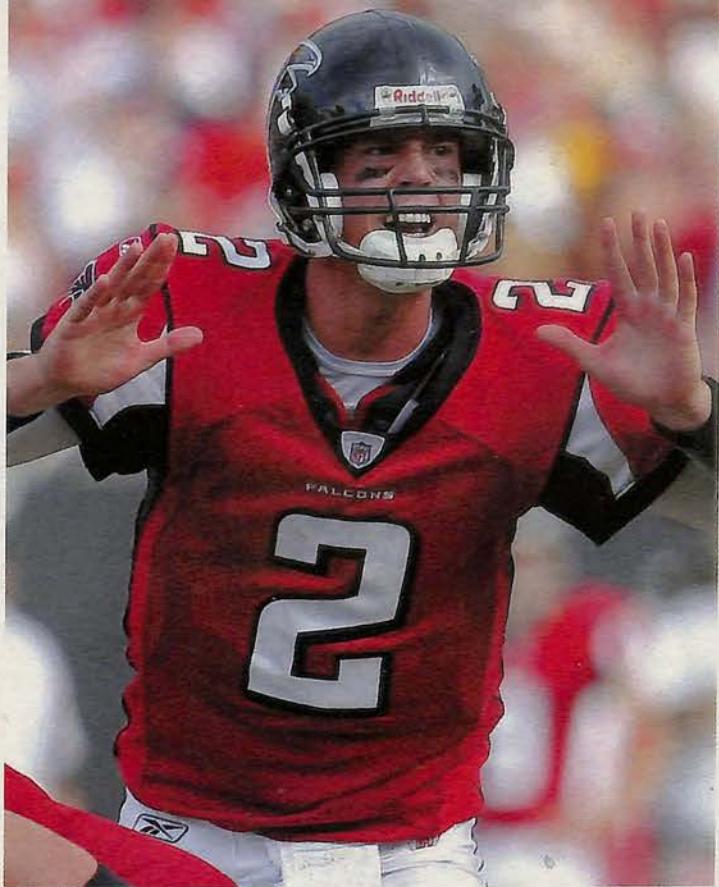
Smith echoes an oft-repeated line by Ryan's coaches past and present that generally goes, "He has *it*, whatever *it* is."

Ah, yes, the *It Factor*. "The ability to quickly and powerfully connect with anyone you meet," says Mark Wiskup, a Tampa-based communications coach and author of *The It Factor: Be The One People Like, Listen To, and Remember*. "It's positively impacting others. 'It' people tend to be intense when they talk but also joyful."

Ryan is manna from heaven to a team torn asunder by the crash-and-burn of quarterback/convicted felon Michael Vick and ship-jumping head coach Bobby Petrino.

Mughelli half-expected "flashy, arrogant, loud," a stereotype of the nouveau riche rookie resented by vets. Instead, he got humble, disarming, part schoolmarm, part class cutup, always deflecting praise to others. Ryan has earned respect by adhering to the rookie hazing tradition of plying his elders with donuts or fried chicken at Saturday walkthroughs and not deplaning from team charters until after everyone else.

But that does not fully explain his burst from the gate in the rookie of the year race. It helped that he was a tailored fit for an offense tilted



RYAN PLAY CALL: KIM KLEMENT/US PRESSWIRE; RYAN ACTION: SCOTT BOEHM/GETTY IMAGES

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toward the power run. That enabled the Falcons to fast-track him into the lineup after the third exhibition. The free-agent signing of running back Michael Turner facilitated Ryan's rapid promotion.

It is taken as gospel that owner Arthur Blank, eager to do cosmetic surgery on the longtime face of the Falcons—that of the canine-abusing Vick—whispered his two cents' worth in the coach's ear about starting Ryan. Or, his 7.2 billion cents' worth, that being the value of Ryan's six-year deal, nearly half guaranteed.

"We want to have the right kind of character," Blank says, but he denies any meddling since draft day.

For much of their existence, the Falcons have been a league doormat, stomped on partly because of cockeyed drafting.

Leaving no football-field divot unturned, a phalanx of coaches and administrators, including the dapper guy who signs the checks, road-tripped in March to watch Ryan's audition workout in Beantown.

That evening, nearly a dozen Falcons reps flanked Ryan in a restaurant's private room, a sort of First Supper. Blank was awestruck: "I don't think I've ever met a 23-year-old as mature as him. Stick him in the middle of the board room, and he'd be comfortable."

BC coach Jeff Jagodzinski told Blank, "You're missing the boat if you don't take him."

At one point in the visit, the staff, looking for confirmation of Jagodzinski's analysis, wheeled out a white dry-erase board, handed Ryan a marker and peppered him with football scenarios.

He flawlessly sketched out every alignment and solution as Dimitroff was struck by his resemblance to the math prodigy from *A Beautiful Mind*. After the drill, he tossed the eraser onto a table and said politely, "Is that all you have for me?"

He plays the media like a graybeard, too, crediting coaches, teammates, luck or fate for his accomplishments. Responses during interviews are cordial but vague. When Ryan speaks, what happens in meeting rooms and locker rooms stays there. (Case in point: Ryan felt violated by reports that he spent \$10,000 on a dressing room sound system for the gang.) Most questions about him are answered about us.

In basket: "Can you give examples of what the coaches have done to make you successful so far?"

Out basket: "The biggest thing is they take their time and teach the offense through the (preseason camps). Not only for me but for everybody on the team."

In basket: "What did the coaches say or what adjustments were made at halftime—when you were 3-for-15—of the Tampa Bay loss that helped you have a much better second half?"

Out basket: "I think it was their positive and upbeat manner. We struggled the first half but knew we had to hang with it."

In basket: "Have you asked the coaches to run a specific play?"

Out basket: "Not really.... They are open to input from me as well as the other players. The thing we do well as players and coaches is work together."



Smith (right) says Ryan learns immediately from his mistakes and doesn't repeat them.

In that vein, his coaches—with an aggregate 188 seasons of NFL experience—are like Ryan, declining to pat themselves on the back and preferring to redirect praise toward him.

Mularkey says his main accomplishment is “letting Matt be himself.”

Mularkey describes his scheme as user-friendly for any quarterback and less elaborate than many. It allows for options if Plan A doesn’t pan out. In exhibition games, he ordered up mostly running plays to help Ryan get comfy. Yet the onetime Bills head coach claims the Week 1 playbook contained more checkoffs and audibles than he had ever included.

“We have not tied him down,” Mularkey says. “We game-plan as if he’s an NFL quarterback, not a rookie quarterback.”

Ryan’s position coach, Bill Musgrave, acknowledges that the blueprint emphasizes “protecting the quarterback, first and foremost.” Beyond that, he dismisses any notion that the staff is tightly gripping the reins on Ryan. “We’re going into games,” Musgrave says, “with all guns blazing.”

Chris Redman, Ryan’s backup, has seen offenses simplified to accommodate a quarterback fresh off campus. “With most rookies they are,” he says, “but not this one.”

Some wide receivers initially fretted when Ryan’s early minicamp throws wobbled or went awry. “He was real anxious,” White recalls. Brian Finneran remembers the first toss to him as “a duck, high and wide.”

No pass doctor got an emergency call. Coaches wrote off the rough start to Ryan’s adapting to the pro game’s DSL-like pace or the different-shaped ball. Finneran says, “About 10 plays later, he hits me with a perfect pass on a seam route.” Now, says White, “He’s throwing a lot harder.”

In Ryan’s inaugural for-real game, coaches were confident enough to dial up a deep ball to Michael Jenkins on Ryan’s first NFL pass that counted. Touchdown, 62 yards.

Ryan had warned coaches that he was a slow starter. “So much for that theory,” Mularkey told him by phone from the press box after the TD.

Next up, in Week 2, the Bucs pressured him relentlessly with a variety of blitzes, a strategy that resulted in four sacks and 14 more hits—some late or unnecessary, in Mularkey’s view. Ryan absorbed such a beating, mostly in the first half, that teammates kept asking, “You all right, Matt?”

“He held on to the ball too long,” Mularkey says, still ticked at the alleged assault while appreciative that it accelerated Ryan’s education. “He learned from it.”

With nary a completion and two interceptions in the Falcons’ first five drives, Ryan eventually completed eight of nine attempts in one second half stretch.

“Oftentimes,” says Smith, “rookie players don’t adjust until the next Monday or Wednesday,” on the practice field or in the film room. That’s not true of Ryan, notes Mularkey: “He never makes the same mistake twice.”

Against the Chiefs a week later, Ryan delivered a second-and-long arc to an unoccupied patch of field that White synchronously ran under for a 70-yard touchdown. The pass was the fruit of Musgrave’s training camp bucket drill, during which Ryan tried to deposit long heaves into a red 36-gallon trash container.

By the fourth game, at Carolina, Ryan had earned enough faith from his superiors that they green-flagged a no-huddle offense. “That’s rare,” Musgrave says.

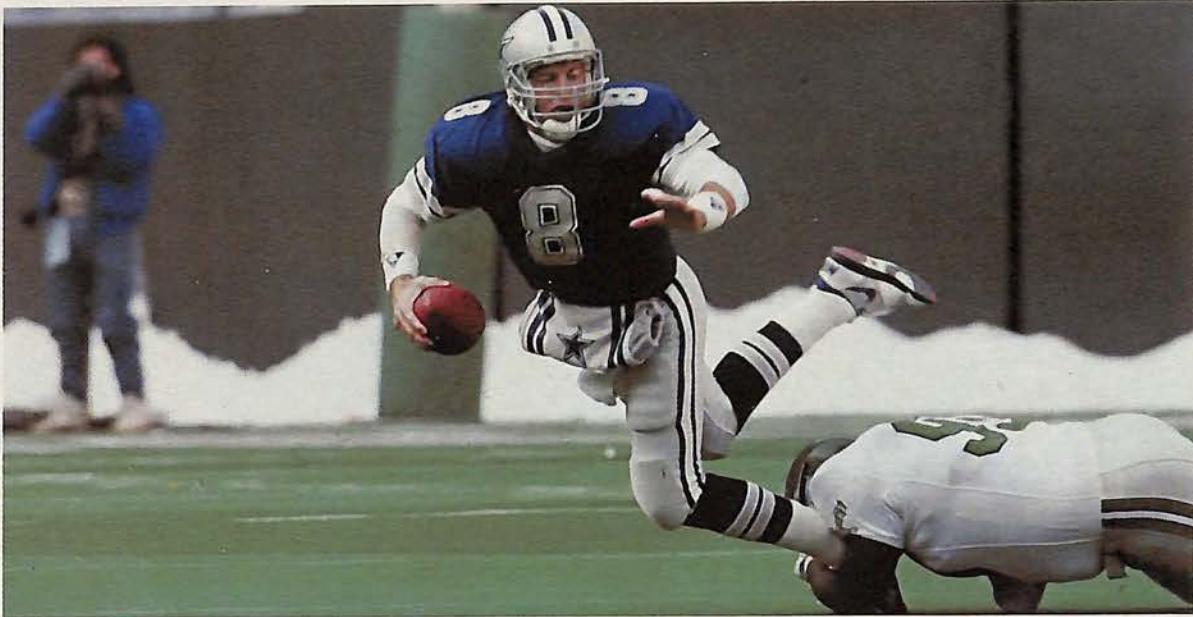
On the four Sundays after being Tampa Bay’s tackling dummy, he was hit thrice, sacked twice, intercepted once.

Kevin Carter and the Bucs hammered Ryan in Week 2, but he has been hard to keep down since.



RYAN STEPHEN MITCHELL/US PRESSWIRE

Fortunately for Ryan, his rookie year is shaping up to be a lot better than mine



Troy Aikman

I'd love to say I have a lot in common with Matt Ryan. He's already won five more games than I did as a rookie. You have to remember I went 0-11 as a starter my rookie year.

I do take a lot of pride in being part of a team that went from 1-15 my rookie year to being Super Bowl champs in my fourth year. In a short period of time, I was able to compare and contrast the highs and lows of pro football.

And I can't imagine being any lower than I was as a rookie. It was miserable. Sure, I was in the NFL and fulfilling a lifelong dream. But when you're a quarterback in this league and you're losing, those boyhood fantasies are easily forgotten. I wouldn't have lasted, wouldn't have been a 12-year player in this league, if I had to go through that every year.

Fortunately, I was with Jimmy Johnson, Jerry Jones and Michael Irvin and others who all hated losing as much as I did. So we were able to get it going in the

right direction. And having gone through all that early in my career, it gave me a better appreciation for winning. I learned firsthand how hard it is to win in the NFL. Heck, even when we had a dominant club and were winning Super Bowls, winning wasn't easy.

Quick example: My rookie year, I broke my finger in my fourth game and missed about a month. First game back, I threw for a rookie-record 379 yards on the road against the Cardinals. I get knocked out cold on a 75-yard touchdown pass to James Dixon that gave us the lead, 20-17. I'm out for like 10 minutes. I come to ... just in time to see Tom Tupa hit Ernie Jones for a 72-yarder to win the game for the Cardinals. It was a hard, hard lesson—physically and emotionally.

The most important thing for me in my rookie year was maintaining my confidence. Jerry Rhome, my quarterbacks coach, really did a great job keeping my head up, keeping me focused and helping me learn.

You learn to trust your receivers. It's not like college, where wide receivers run through the secondary wide-open. In the NFL, you soon realize that the best you can get is single coverage on your receiver; you must trust your

Almost 20 years later, plays like this one still leave a mental mark.

receiver to beat his man and make a play. The bigger concern is the speed at which the defensive backs break on the ball. You have to learn where you can fit the ball in and where you can't. And you have to read, presnap, the defenders who can take routes away and either audible or go somewhere else with the ball. Those are all things quarterbacks learn in time.

Being an NFL quarterback is more of a mental test each week than a physical test, even though the physical part is no picnic. All the guys can make the throws. Some quarterbacks make certain throws better than others, but they all can make plays. Making the correct decisions and making them quickly while under duress separates the great ones.

And just about the time you have it all figured out, it's time to retire and go into broadcasting.

Troy Aikman, a Pro Football Hall of Fame quarterback, is a regular contributor to Sporting News and host of the weekly Troy Aikman Show on Sporting News Radio.

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The coaches accept no kudos for Ryan's command of the huddle, which allows for give-and-take. White, who admits to freestyling on occasional pass routes, has been chastised by Ryan: "You need to be at the right place at the right time." Yet, when White ran an elusive slant route for naught and told him, "I beat the guy and you didn't get the ball to me," Ryan did so two plays later.

Any minireel of Ryan highlights would lead with his final pass of the sixth game. The Bears, ahead by a point, had left Ryan staring at 6 seconds on the clock and nearly two-thirds of the field in front of him.

The Falcons eschewed a gimmick play, common in such situations, and trusted Ryan to nail a mid-distance, needle-threading sideline shot within five ticks to permit a field goal. Under a ferocious rush, Ryan hit Jenkins for 26 yards, just enough ground for a game-winning 48-yard kick.

"I loved that he threw a (direct) shot and not a Hail Mary," Dimitroff says.

To McClure, the center, "It was amazing." And to interested observer Steve Bartkowski, "That was phenomenal."

"I'm overwhelmed by Matt," says the Falcons' pioneer rookie starting quarterback 33 seasons ago, now serving on the team's board of directors. "I knew he was an exceptional talent physically and a really smart kid. But to step in and take charge like that ..."

Color the Bears dazzled, too. "Out of all the young guys (in the league), he is the one that has really impressed me, and that's over the last couple years," defensive end Adewale Ogunleye says. "He played a veteran defense like ours and wasn't really shaken at all."

With his almost overnight maturation, Ryan has invoked comparisons to Peyton Manning and Tom Brady, contemporary mugs on the NFL's Mount Rushmore of quarterbacks. Dimitroff, who emigrated from the Patriots, says, "When I first laid eyes on Matt, I saw No. 12 (his number at BC), and I got a little excited." Not so much for his bodily gifts but for that barely definable factor that coaches have ascribed to him.

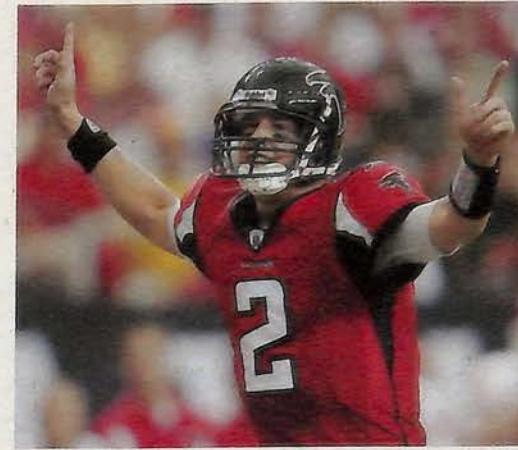
Tag. He's It.

OUT OF ALL THE YOUNG GUYS (IN THE LEAGUE), HE IS THE ONE THAT HAS REALLY IMPRESSED ME, AND THAT'S OVER THE LAST COUPLE YEARS.

— Adewale Ogunleye, Bears defensive end

But wait, it gets better

Go back 25 years, to the most famous quarterback draft class in NFL history, and rookie QBs in that span have had mixed success. There's Dan Marino's record-setting 1983 season and Ben Roethlisberger's remarkable 2004, when he broke many of Marino's marks. But there are less than stellar starts by *Sporting News* contributors John Elway and Troy Aikman (sorry, fellas), though they, like Marino, fashioned Hall of Fame careers and, unlike Marino, ended up winning Super Bowls. The NFL's first family of QBs? Check it out: Peyton and Eli combined to win four of the first 24 games in which they played. So, what's that mean for Matt Ryan? He's in good company—no matter which way his season goes from here.



QB, team	Year	Through 8 appearances						Final regular-season totals					
		Att.	Comp.	Int.	Yds.	TD	W-L	Att.	Comp.	Int.	Yds.	TD	W-L
Dan Marino, Dolphins	1983	220	124	5	1,558	15	4-4	296	173	6	2,210	20	7-4
John Elway, Broncos	1983	157	71	9	891	2	2-6	259	123	14	1,663	7	4-7
Troy Aikman, Cowboys	1989	213	109	13	1,388	8	0-8	293	155	18	1,749	9	0-11
Peyton Manning, Colts	1998	292	161	16	1,873	11	1-7	575	326	28	3,739	26	3-13
Eli Manning, Giants	2004	170	77	8	899	3	1-7	197	95	9	1,043	6	2-7
Ben Roethlisberger, Steelers	2004	171	117	6	1,450	11	7-1	295	196	11	2,621	17	13-1
Matt Ryan, Falcons	2008	227	133	5	1,661	9	5-3	454	266	10	3,322	18	10-6

—Bob Hille

Note: Final regular-season W-L reflects games in which QB appeared; Ryan's regular-season totals are a projection based on his year to date.

What do you remember most about your first eight NFL games?



John Elway

"It was like a fruit salad. Everything was going in every direction. I didn't know what was going on. I started my first four games and then was benched for the next four. I needed the break, to exhale and figure everything out."



Troy Aikman

"My rookie season was the most miserable eight months of my life. Professionally, personally, socially. ... When you don't win, there isn't a thing that's cool about being an NFL quarterback."



Eli Manning

"You're trying to figure out what you do well, what your team does well. Your coaches are trying to find out what works for you, what's your style of playing quarterback. ... It's hard as a rookie to tell a coach, 'This is what I like,' but sometimes you got to do it just to make everything work a little more smoothly."



Ben Roethlisberger

"I don't remember anything. It was a blur, honestly, that's what it was. I was just trying to learn the plays, learn who was hot and what the snap count was. Literally, it was a whirlwind of everything."



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‘Grounded?’

Cardinals receiver **Larry Fitzgerald** flies high on the field and off, but he has a firm grasp of what's important

By Clifton Brown

Really?

Parachute on his back, about 12,000 feet in the air, Larry Fitzgerald felt his heart pounding as he looked down from the airplane. Fitzgerald loves this kind of thrill, skydiving for the first time, living life to the hilt, adding to his collection of bucket list moments.

He attacks life the same way he attacks a football in midair. During the offseason, you might find him on the end of a bungee cord. Or perhaps he'll be scuba diving in Australia. Or hang-gliding in the Caribbean—or planning a trip to Argentina or Turkey or one of the many other countries he has visited.

So while hanging out with his brother, Marcus, at the Hula Bowl last year, Fitzgerald could not resist the chance to experience another thrill. Nothing is too adventurous for Fitzgerald, one of the NFL's most acrobatic wide receivers. Well, almost nothing. This skydiving thing was a little disconcerting.

"Your legs turn into spaghetti as you walk toward the door of the plane," says Fitzgerald. "My instructor was great, but he liked to joke. As I got ready to jump, he took my hand and said, 'Don't worry, I've had thousands of jumps. And I've only lost one guy.' Then he pulled my arm, and out we went."

Did Fitzgerald scream?

"No, I didn't," says Fitzgerald. "And if I did, I'd never tell you."

As usual, he landed on his feet. But why is Fitzgerald, described as laid-back and quiet by Arizona Cardinals teammates, such an adventurer?

"Tomorrow's guaranteed to none of us," he says. "I'm a firm believer that you have to take advantage of opportunities when you have them because who knows if you'll ever get them again."

Fitzgerald learned a cruel lesson in college that life can be fleeting. In 2003, his mother, Carol, died of breast cancer at age 47. Anyone who has lost a parent that young can relate to his pain. Fitzgerald still carries his mother's driver's license in his wallet. Her voice remains on his father's answering machine so Fitzgerald and Marcus can hear her when they call home.

Fitzgerald believes that every day is precious, so whatever he does, he does with passion. Fortunately for the Cardinals, Fitzgerald is passionate about football.

"Larry wants to be great," says Cardinals coach Ken Whisenhunt. "He comes early and stays late. Everything about him keeps getting better—his route running, his runs after catches,



As if being an NFL player weren't exciting enough, Fitzgerald partakes in some adrenaline-packed hobbies.

his blocking. Larry has a lot of ability, but he's good for a reason. His success is no accident."

In two of the past three seasons, Fitzgerald has caught at least 100 passes for at least 1,400 yards. He and Anquan Boldin are recognized as one of the league's best wide receiver combos, and Fitzgerald's \$10 million-a-year contract can pay for a lot bungee jumping.

So what does Cardinals general manager Rod Graves think of one of the franchise's key pieces dangling from the end of a bungee rope?

"Rod told me to chill out," says Fitzgerald. "I may have to cut back on some hobbies until I retire."

At age 25, Fitzgerald has plenty of career left. And he has never been happier with the Cardinals—they are finally playoff contenders, the team to beat in the NFC West. Arizona last made the playoffs in 1998, when Fitzgerald was in high school.

Even then, Fitzgerald had his sights set on the NFL. He grew up in Minneapolis, tagging along behind his father, Larry, a longtime sportswriter and radio/TV personality in Minnesota who has covered the Vikings for two decades. Through his father's connections, young Larry became a Vikings ballboy at age 11 and worked for the Vikings throughout his teenage years during the regular season and training camp. That experience gave Fitzgerald a firsthand look at what playing in the NFL was really like.

"My son has been around great athletes his whole life," says Larry Sr., sports editor of the *Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder*. "Hanging out

Fitzgerald is best known for using his combination of size (6-3, 220) and leaping ability to make acrobatic catches.

with the Vikings, he was around guys like Cris Carter, Randy Moss, Robert Smith and Daunte Culpepper every day. He saw how hard they work, how they think, how they live. We weren't rich, but Larry was blessed. It's the kind of experience you can't put a price on, and it stuck with him."

Carter, the Vikings' all-time leading receiver, is like a surrogate big brother to Fitzgerald. Though Carter is proud of the player and person Fitzgerald has become, he still enjoys busting Fitzgerald's chops.

"Larry was a goofy kid," says Carter, now an analyst for ESPN. "He was into everything. We had to watch him all the time. But he was smart. He used to wash our cars and park them at training camp. We didn't realize he couldn't even drive yet. We were actually

teaching him how to drive, but we didn't know it. Could I tell for sure, back then, that Larry was going to be an NFL player? No, I couldn't. But he soaked up everything we told him. And you could tell he had some special gifts."

One of those gifts is Fitzgerald's massive hands. When Fitzgerald shakes hands, his fingers creep up your forearm. Once he gets two hands on a football, forget it. No defensive back is going to pry it away.

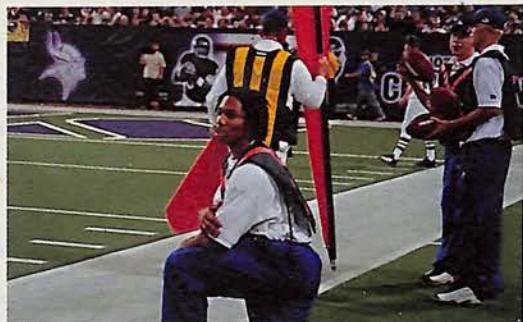
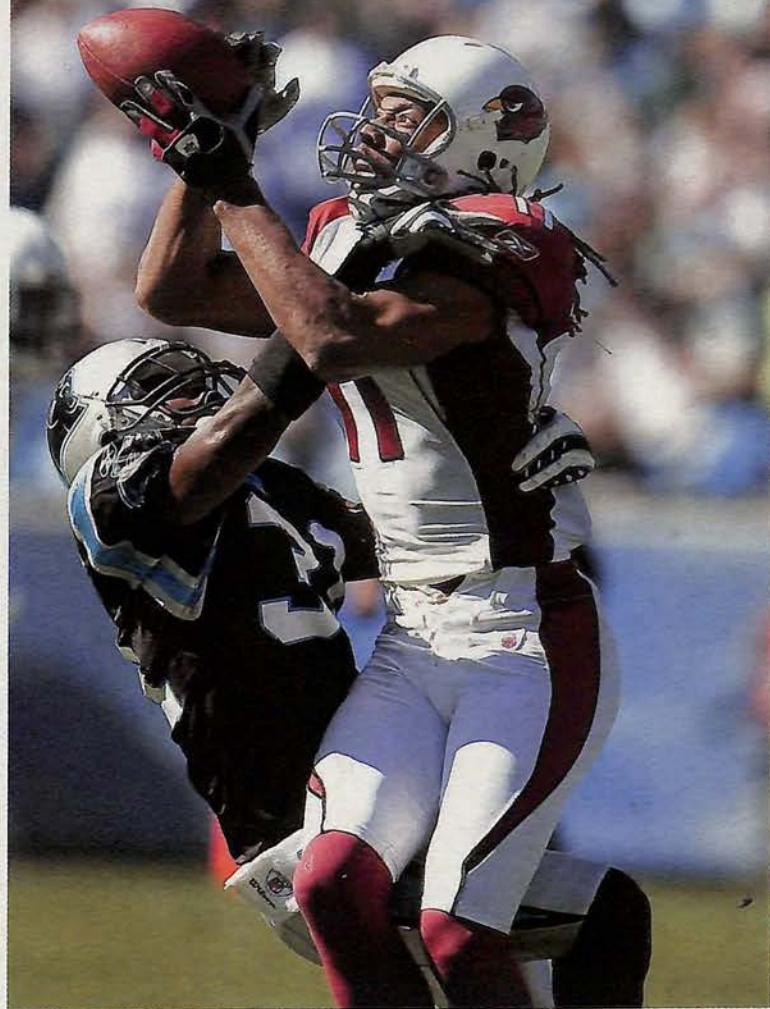
"I wish I could take credit for his hands and leaping ability, but I can't," says Cardinals wide receivers coach Mike Miller. "Everyone has a favorite Larry Fitzgerald catch. Some of his best ones are in practice. When the ball's in the air, he thinks it's his property. His ability to make plays in the air—that's what separates him from the average guy."

Carter is biased, sure, but knows a special receiver when he sees one.

"I can't say I've ever seen anybody with better hands," says Carter. "Keith Byars, Keith Jackson and Randy Moss—those are three guys I played with who had special hands. Larry's are just as good."

Despite his son's athletic ability, Larry Sr. made sure to keep Junior's ego in check. Notice that when Fitzgerald scores a touchdown, he usually flips the ball to an official and runs away. No elaborate end zone dance. No spiking the ball with ferocity. Doesn't Fitzgerald know that wide receivers are supposed to be divas? Not this one, not as long as his father is watching.

Growing up, Fitzgerald learned about football as a Vikings ballboy and about life as the son of Larry Sr.



The complete package

Since the start of the 2005 season, Larry Fitzgerald's second in the league, he is the only receiver in the NFL to rank in the top five in receptions, receiving yards and receiving touchdowns.

Player, team	Rec.
1. T.J. Houshmandzadeh, Bengals	334
2. Larry Fitzgerald, Cardinals	315
3. Torry Holt, Rams	314
4. Reggie Wayne, Colts	311
5. Chad Johnson, Bengals	309

"I was really tough on Larry growing up, probably because he carries my name," says Larry Sr. "But I wanted him to act a certain way. I never wanted him to think he could get by just because he was a good athlete. I never wanted him to think he was better than other kids, to show up another kid just because he could score touchdowns. I never had any serious problems with Larry, but one time he missed curfew during training camp working for the Vikings. They didn't make a big deal out of it. I did. I pulled him out of camp for a week. I was sending a message. The rules for you are the same as they are for anybody else. He got it."

Fitzgerald's character convinced the Cardinals he could handle being the No. 3 overall pick in the 2004 draft. Dennis Green,

Arizona's coach at the time, had been the Vikings' head coach when Fitzgerald was a ballboy.

"I knew Larry, I knew his family, and I knew that money wouldn't change him," says Green. "Money messes up so many guys. But Larry's too grounded for that. You knew he'd still be the same guy."

Alan Anderson, who grew up with Fitzgerald in Minneapolis, describes him as a great friend but says he's fiercely competitive.

"Larry wants to win at everything," says Anderson, who plays professional basketball in Russia. "Here's one story that he'll never tell you. When we were in high school, we played against each other in the playoffs, and I had two interceptions against him. If you ask him about it, he'll deny it. He can't stand it when I bring it up, so

Player, team	Yards
1. Chad Johnson, Bengals	4,553
2. Larry Fitzgerald, Cardinals	4,425
3. Reggie Wayne, Colts	4,396
4. Steve Smith, Panthers	4,344
5. Torry Holt, Rams	3,997

Player, team	TDs
1. Terrell Owens, Eagles/Cowboys	39
2. Randy Moss, Raiders/Patriots	38
3. Plaxico Burress, Giants	32
4. Larry Fitzgerald, Cardinals	31
4. T.J. Houshmandzadeh, Bengals	31
5. Steve Smith, Panthers	31

Statistics through Week 8

I bring it up all the time. But stuff like that motivates him. I knew he'd make the NFL because he has the talent and his work ethic is unbelievable."

Not surprisingly, raising money for cancer research has become one of Fitzgerald's off-field passions. He has been known to show up unannounced at fundraising events around Phoenix, using his celebrity to help a cause that is very personal.

"Cancer has nothing to do with money, color, fame or anything else," says Fitzgerald. "Everybody knows somebody who's had it or who has been impacted by it. I know what it can take. It took my mother."

Fortunately, it has not taken his zest for life. Ask Fitzgerald where he plans to travel next offseason and he rattles off a list of possibilities: Dubai, Jerusalem, Morocco, Asia. Some of his teammates love to play golf in their spare time, but Fitzgerald finds that sport so maddening he has thought about quitting.

"Golf is so damn frustrating," he says. "If you're really good at something, it really bothers you to be so bad at something else. I'm horrible. I take lessons during the offseason, but my dad still beats me and enjoys it too much. That's the main reason I want to get good at golf, to beat my dad."

Larry Sr. roars with laughter at that comment: "Tell him to keep practicing, but it will never happen. Here's the difference. I hit it 260 yards, but you can find it. Larry hits it 300, but you'll never find it."

Finding the fairway is difficult for Fitzgerald. Finding the end zone is not. And Fitzgerald is just daring enough to think that something special could be brewing this season with the Cardinals.

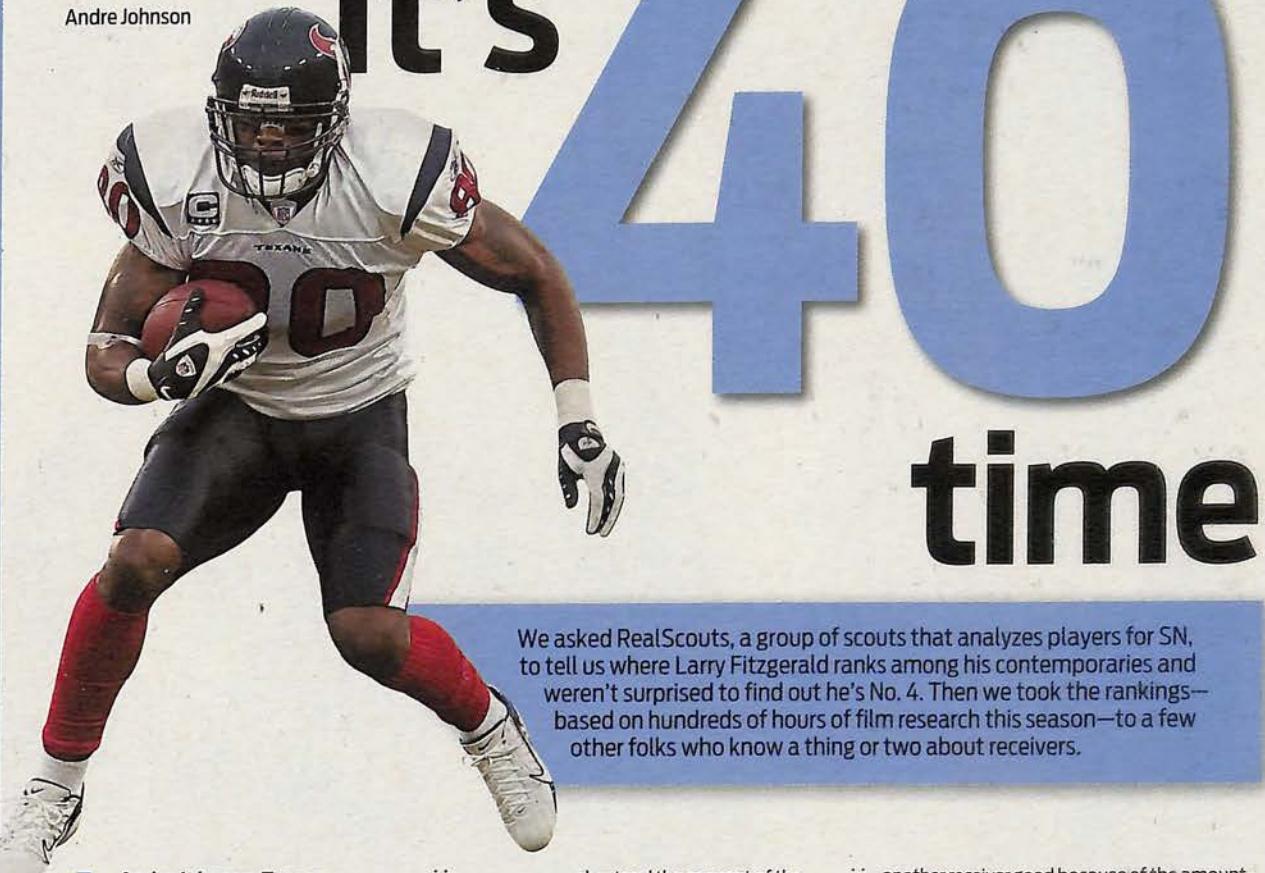
"We've got all the pieces to make the playoffs, we just have to put it all together," he says. "I have two main career goals—to win Super Bowls and to make the Hall of Fame. I feel with the talent I've been blessed with, and as hard as I work, those goals are realistic."

And whether he is preparing for his next game or planning his next adventure, Fitzgerald is determined to enjoy the journey. Carter has closely watched Fitzgerald blossom, from NFL ballboy to one of the NFL's best wide receivers, and loves that Fitzgerald plays every game with the same enthusiasm he had as a child.

"I always say that Larry hands the ball to the referee because he's in a hurry to score another touchdown," says Carter. "I've known Larry's family for a long time, and they laid a great foundation. He's just following the right path."

Just like a wide receiver should.

Andre Johnson



We asked RealScouts, a group of scouts that analyzes players for SN, to tell us where Larry Fitzgerald ranks among his contemporaries and weren't surprised to find out he's No. 4. Then we took the rankings—based on hundreds of hours of film research this season—to a few other folks who know a thing or two about receivers.

1. Andre Johnson, Texans

"I think this year I'm playing smarter: I'm seeing the field, I'm picking my spots and recognizing defenses. I'm getting better, and I'm not just flying around and rushing things." — Andre Johnson

2. Brandon Marshall, Broncos

"What makes him a good receiver is he is physical and loves contact. I am an aggressive cornerback, and many times you can bully receivers on the field because they don't want to be touched, but he welcomes the fight." — Raiders CB Nnamdi Asomugha

3. Steve Smith, Panthers

"He can run like the wind, he has quickness, he is competitive. ... If there is one play that has to be made, I like Steve Smith." — Former NFL coach Marty Schottenheimer

4. Larry Fitzgerald, Cardinals

5. Reggie Wayne, Colts

"He's a smart dude. If you give him the same look, he can figure out what the defense is trying to do to contain him. With Reggie and his quarterback, they're a real challenge defensively." — Patriots S James Sanders

6. Terrell Owens, Cowboys

"Terrell's a very smart player. He gets it. Before coming here, I was hearing some of the things that are said, and I didn't buy it. You have to understand the adjustments you have to make, what opens up where, and

understand the concept of the offense. Terrell understands the concepts, and that's what people miss." — Cowboys receivers coach Ray Sherman

7. Calvin Johnson, Lions

"I think he's very, very talented. From a negative standpoint, he's a big strider. To me, what prevents him from being in the class with some other guys is I don't see him being able to stop and change directions and separate from people." — Ex-NFL receiver Cris Carter

8. Anquan Boldin, Cardinals

"When the ball's in his hands, he's as good as anyone. He's the epitome of a guy that DBs and linebackers don't want to tackle. We can use him to block a linebacker or defensive end, and he's not gonna balk at it." — Cardinals offensive coordinator Todd Haley

9. Greg Jennings, Packers

"He is extremely athletic, he runs great routes, he is a complete football player, and he does everything. I just see him getting better and better. He is not a T.O. or Chad Johnson where you hear a whole lot about him. He is just a team player, so I like him." — Ex-NFL coach Dan Reeves

10. Randy Moss, Patriots

"At no point in Randy's career has there ever been nine receivers in the league better than him. He still has the ability to change defenses like none of the other receivers. He also has the ability to make

another receiver good because of the amount of attention you have to pay to him. And he still is the most dangerous deep threat in the NFL." — Former teammate Cris Carter

11. T.J. Houshmandzadeh, Bengals

12. Marques Colston, Saints

13. Lee Evans, Bills

14. Roddy White, Falcons

15. Santana Moss, Redskins

16. Vincent Jackson, Chargers

17. Plaxico Burress, Giants

18. Bernard Berrian, Vikings

19. Eddie Royal, Broncos

20. Marvin Harrison, Colts

21. Hines Ward, Steelers

22. Donald Driver, Packers

23. Braylon Edwards, Browns

24. Chris Chambers, Chargers

25. Roy Williams, Cowboys

26. DeSean Jackson, Eagles

27. Torry Holt, Rams

28. Steve Breaston, Cardinals

29. Santonio Holmes, Steelers

30. Laveranues Coles, Jets

31. Dwayne Bowe, Chiefs

32. Antonio Bryant, Buccaneers

33. Wes Welker, Patriots

34. Anthony Gonzalez, Colts

35. Donnie Avery, Rams

36. Derrick Mason, Ravens

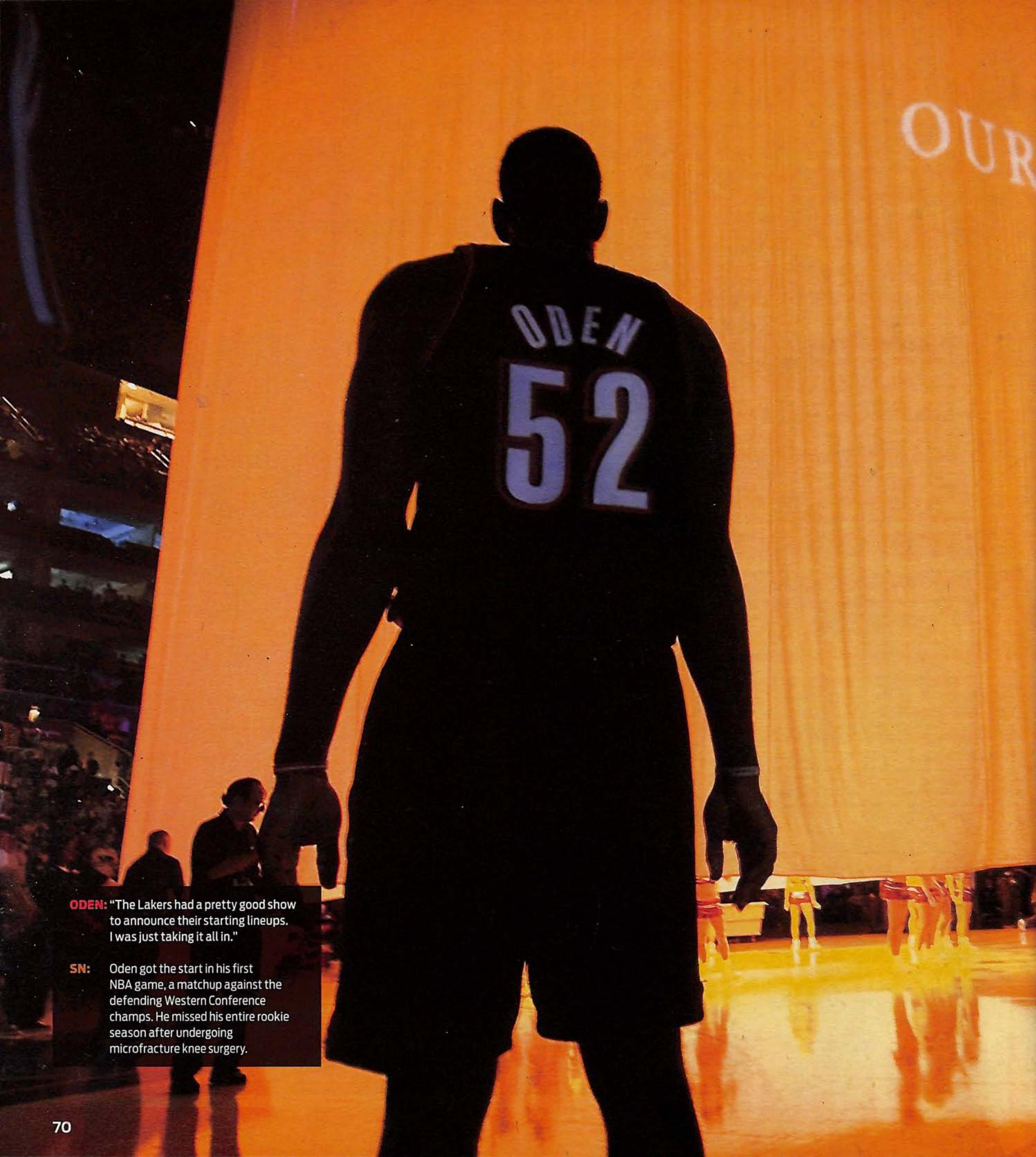
37. Antwaan Randle-El, Redskins

38. Jerricho Cotchery, Jets

39. Muhsin Muhammad, Panthers

40. Bobby Engram, Seahawks

— Contributing: Albert Breer, Dennis Dillon and Vinnie Iyer



ODEN: "The Lakers had a pretty good show to announce their starting lineups. I was just taking it all in."

SN: Oden got the start in his first NBA game, a matchup against the defending Western Conference champs. He missed his entire rookie season after undergoing microfracture knee surgery.

BIG MAN, BIG STAGE

MAN, STAGE

What was SN columnist/former No. 1 overall pick Greg Oden thinking just before his first game in 575 days? It wasn't that he'd have to wait another few weeks to play again, that's for sure. But the Trail Blazers center took a painful first night of his NBA career in stride and gave us a glimpse of what was on his mind as he went from suit to uniform and back to suit again.



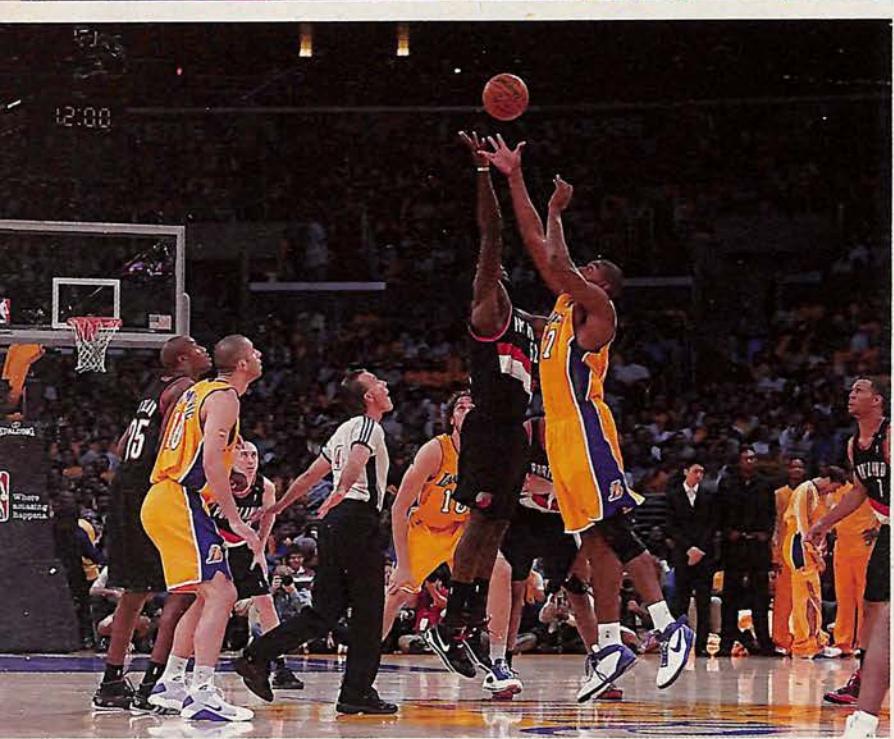
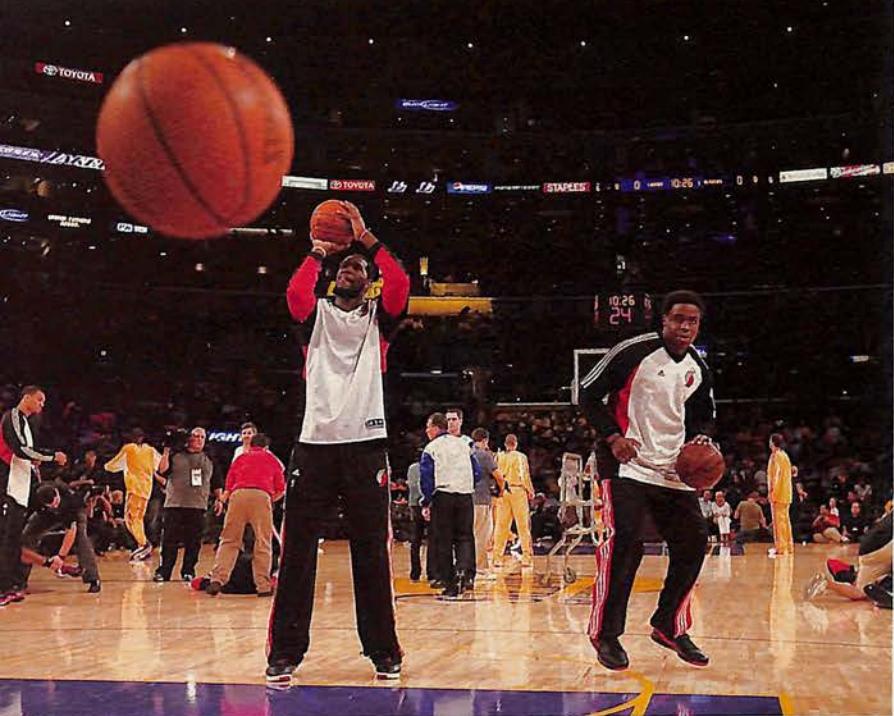
ODEN: "Here I am walking into Staples Center. I try not to get too excited, but I was definitely looking forward to the game. I couldn't shake the cameras, though—they seemed to go everywhere I did."

SN: Get used to it, Greg. The entire city of Portland—and basketball fans everywhere—have been waiting an awfully long time to see you play.

Photos by Jay Drowns / SN

ODEN: "This is our pregame warmup. I'm just getting a feel for my foul shots."

SN: Oden shot only 62.8 percent from the line at Ohio State, but that was mostly shooting lefthanded while his right wrist recovered from surgery.

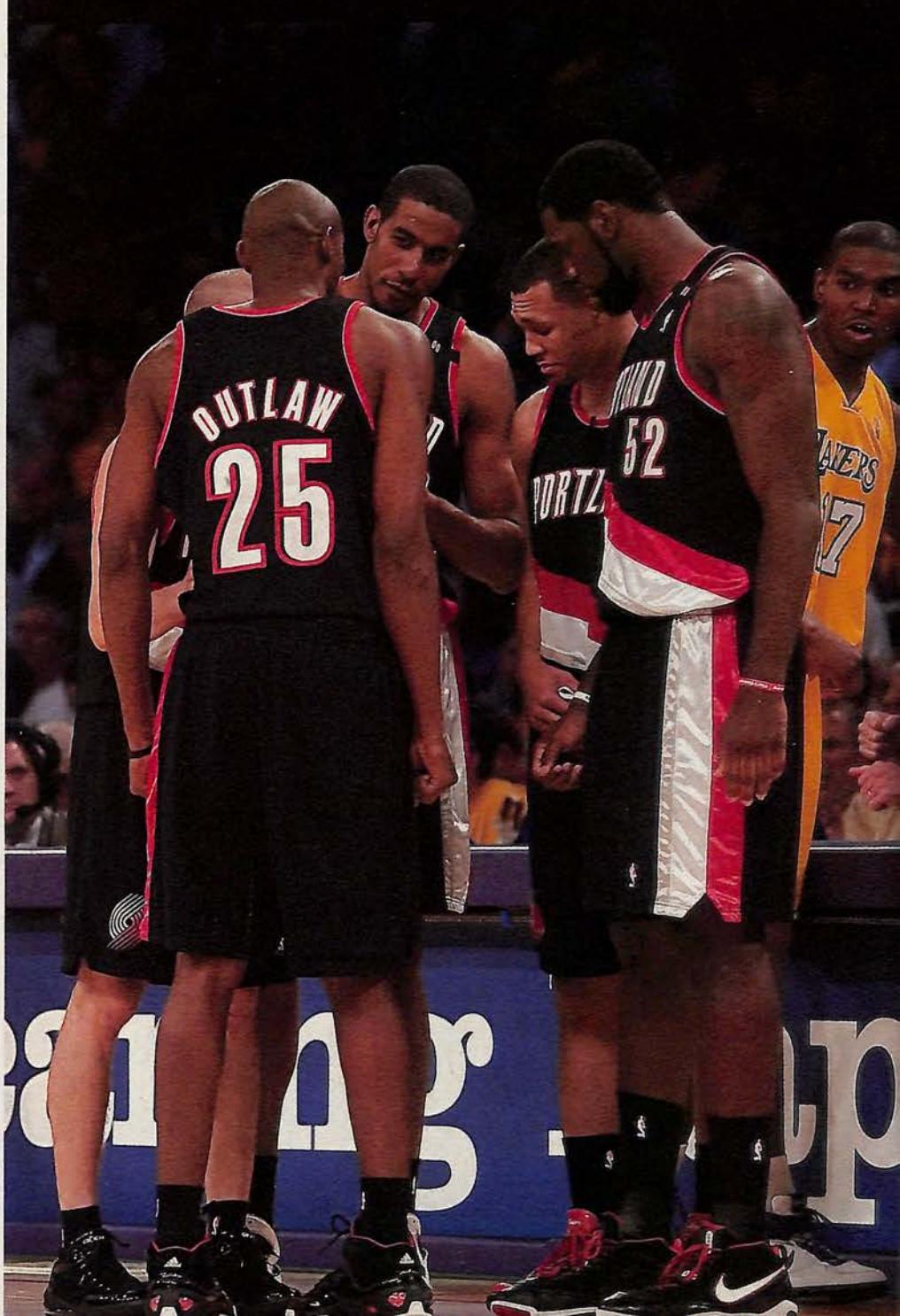


ODEN: "It's official! I finally started my first NBA game! I stayed composed during the opening tip, even though I was really happy and ready to start the game on the right foot."

SN: Lakers center Andrew Bynum, a 7-footer just like Oden, won the tip, and the Lakers never trailed.

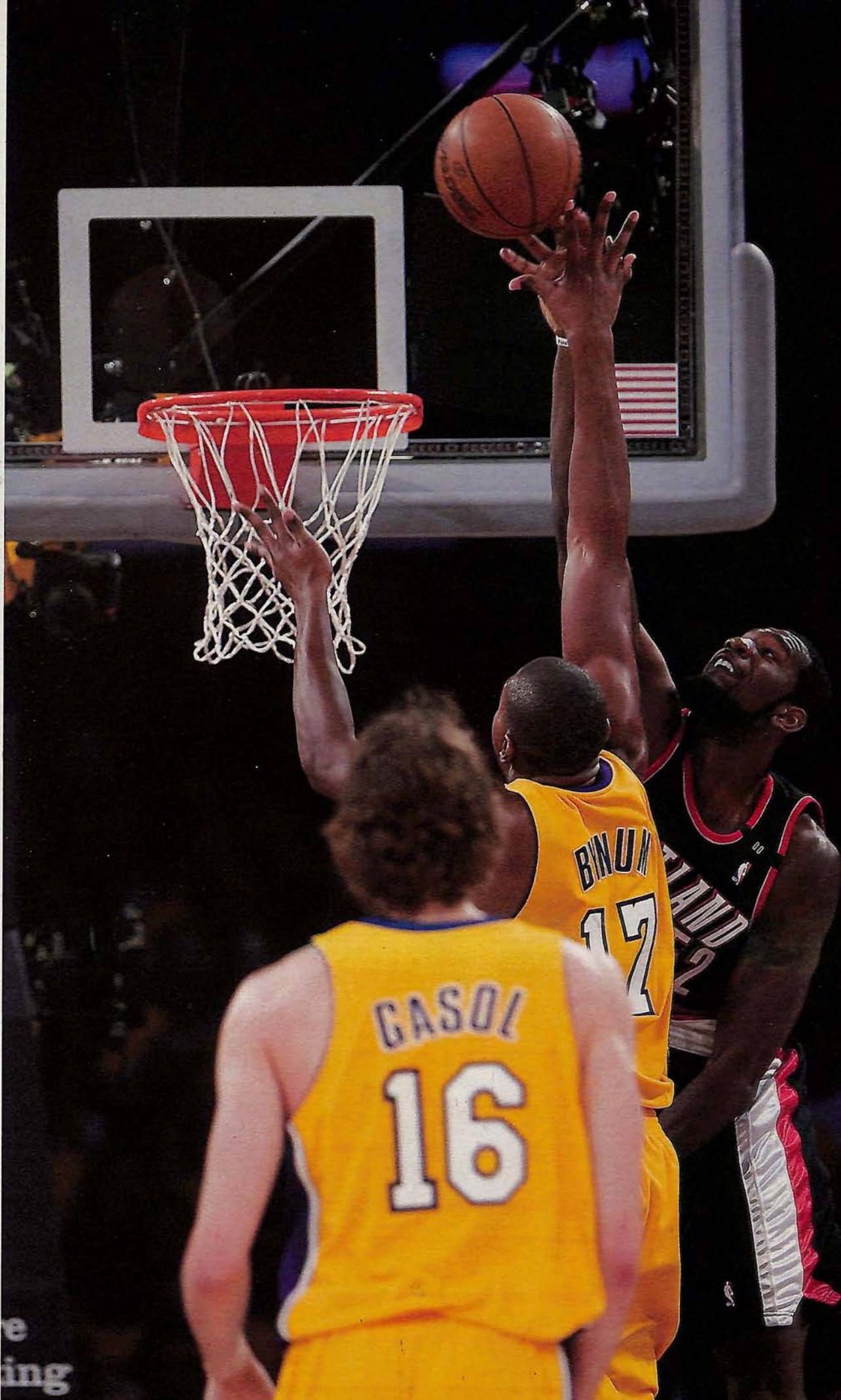
ODEN: "Before the game tipped off, my teammates and I had a quick pregame pep talk. As the newest starter, I just listened to the vets before I walked to center court."

SN: Though Oden was wise to listen to his older teammates, "older" is relative—the Blazers' four other starters on opening night had a combined 14 years of NBA experience.



ODEN: "Here I am in action trying to stop Andrew Bynum. Andrew and I played against each other once when we were little kids, maybe about sixth grade. It's cool we've both made it this far—even though I'm going to try to block his shot any time I can."

SN: Oden got his first career block against Bynum, who also was making a much-anticipated return from knee surgery, which caused him to miss a big chunk of last season.



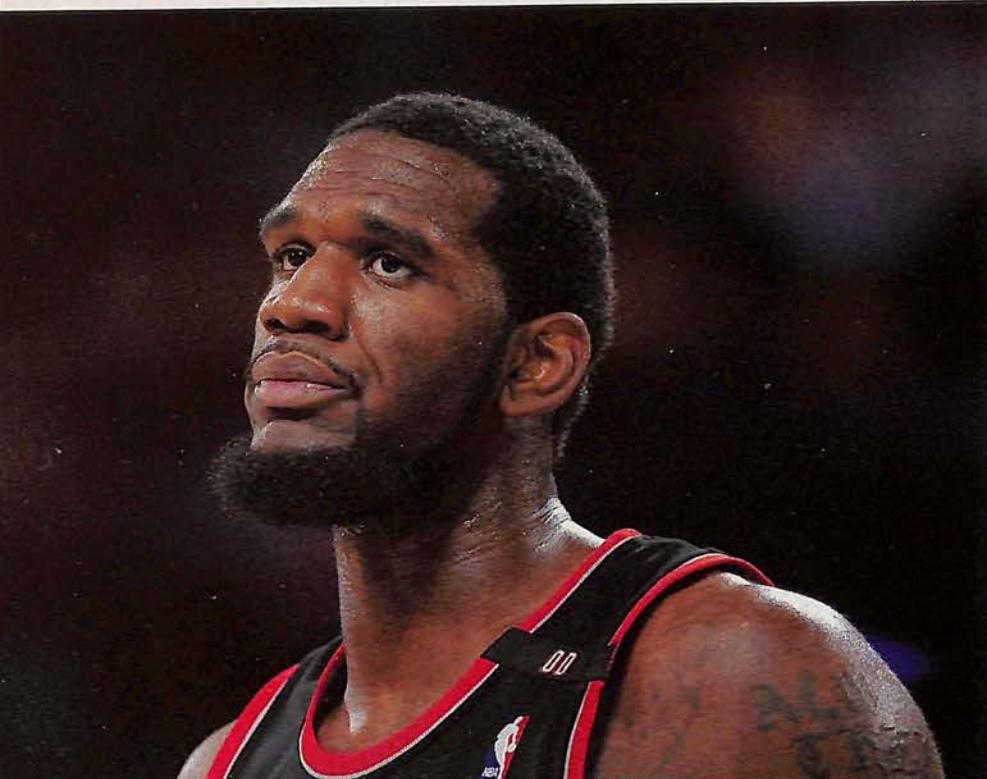
ODEN: "Well, that's me. What do you guys think of my beard? I'm feeling this look on me right now."

SN: We like it, too, Greg. It's a little bit Abe Lincoln, a little bit rock 'n' roll.



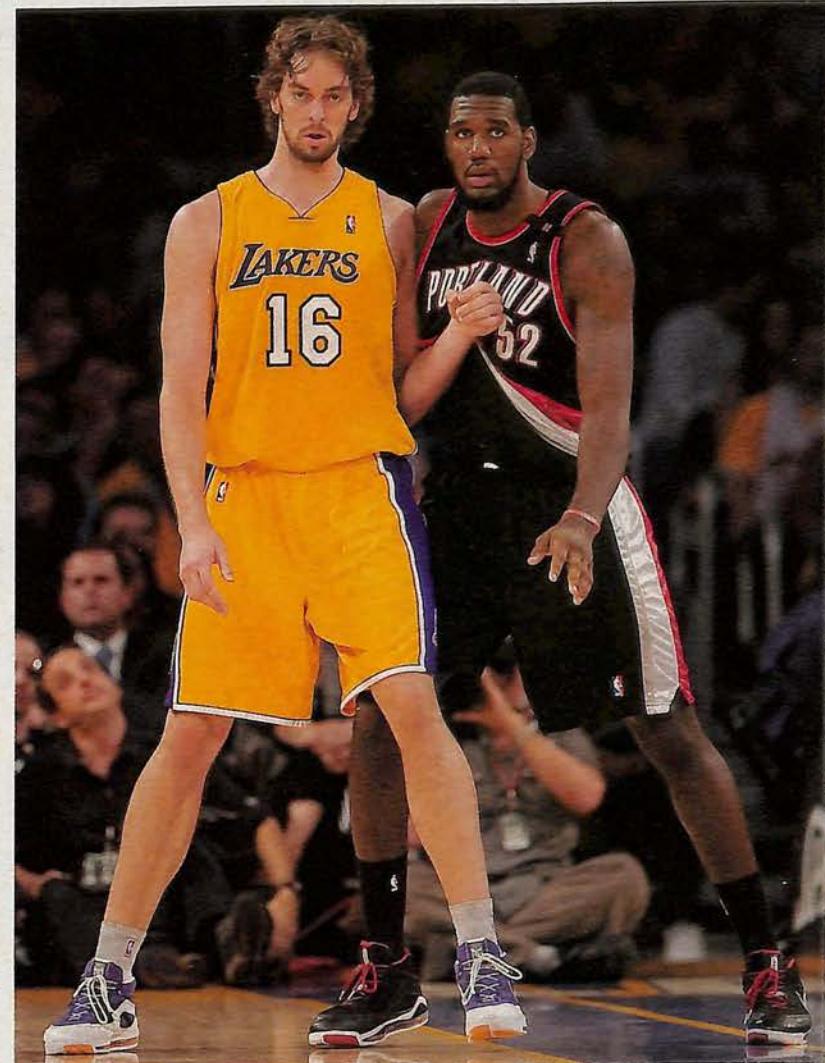
ODEN: "The yellow shirts were playing decent defense, but I did my best to put up a good fight."

SN: "Decent" defense included holding the Blazers to 34.5 percent shooting. Oden finished 0-for-4 with zero points and five rebounds.



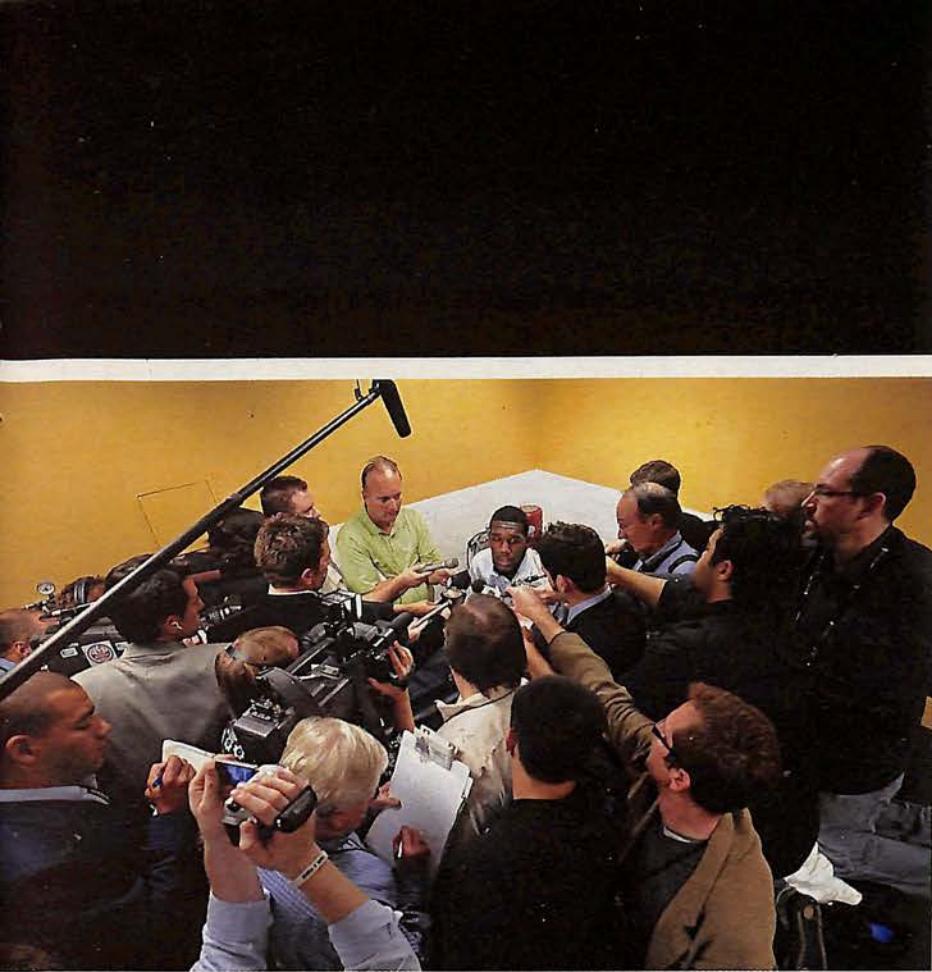
ODEN: "Pau Gasol is stronger than you think. I had to be all up on him."

SN: Phil Jackson calls Pau Gasol "lanky," but don't tell that to Oden, who had to deal with two 7-footers—Gasol and Bynum—in his first game.



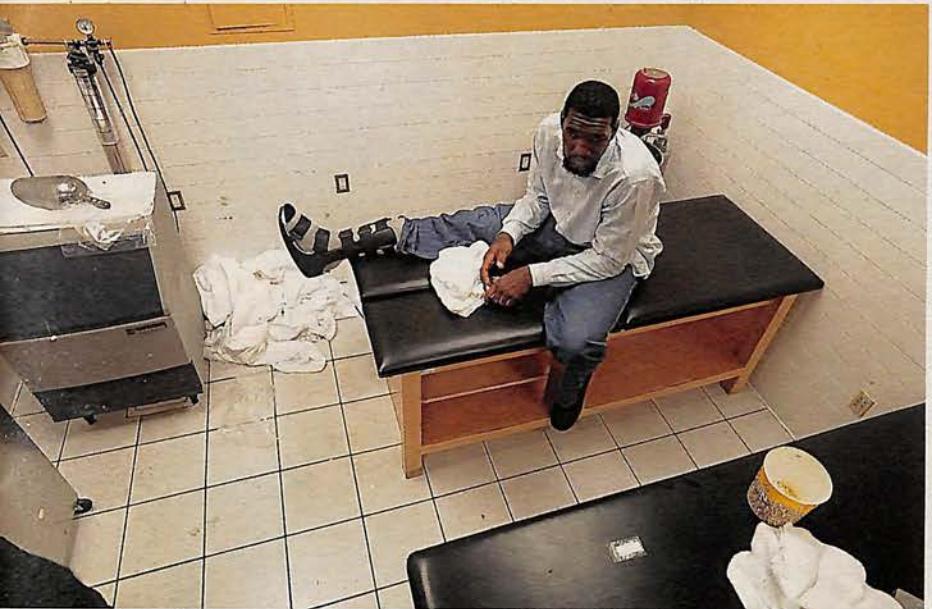
ODEN: "I had to sit down. I was a little tired."

SN: Oden played most of his 13 first half minutes on a sore right foot that he injured early in the game. He didn't return in the second half, and the Blazers ended up losing, 96-76.



ODEN: "Can you find me in there? Look closely and you'll see me amongst the mikes and tape recorders. Everyone wanted to hear what I had to say, which wasn't too much. I was ready to go home since the game didn't go how I had hoped."

SN: It's never a good thing when you conduct your postgame press conference from the trainer's room, but all things considered, Oden got off easy.



ODEN: "This is my latest new piece of footwear. This is not the shoe I would choose at all. I have a midfoot sprain, and now I'm out of the mix for a few weeks. I take things in stride, and I'll be fine."

SN: Put the headphones on, big fella, and those few weeks will be over in no time. Things can only get better from here.



NBA

The makings of a real NBA team



Wade is back—which could mean the Heat are, too.

Wade will mean a lot more than 15 wins this season, but we asked one to break down the Heat's "new" starting five anyway:

► **PG Mario Chalmers.** He has long arms, can pressure people and can get to the rim some. I don't know what kind of shooter he'll be on 3s. But really, all he will be asked to do on offense is make the entry pass to Wade or Beasley.

► **SG Dwyane Wade.** Based on what I saw in the Olympics, he's looking pretty good. Is he back to where he was? That's tough to say. No way do I see the Heat being a contender, but with Wade, Beasley and Marion, they'll be in the fight for the seventh or eighth spot.

► **SF Shawn Marion.** He's a nice fill-in for a year and a half because they had to get rid of Shaq. Marion talked about being underappreciated in Phoenix, but they were paying him \$17 million a year. How underappreciated is that? Now he's going to be the third option with the Heat.

► **PF Michael Beasley.** He can score the ball. Right now. He can shoot, handle a bit and post up. They don't have anyone else to post up, so look for him to get the ball a lot down low. He's a heck of a talent. That said, I don't think he's a Heat kind of player. He's never going to defend, and he's not the hard, physical, Pat Riley-type player.

► **C Udonis Haslem.** He seems a little more offensive-minded with his 17-footer. He's undersized (6-8) for a center even though the league is going smaller and smaller. There are going to be nights—against Dwight Howard or Toronto, for example—when he has it tough.

—Stan McNeal

Q&A with Michael Beasley

The level of play in the NBA can be eye-opening for a rookie—even the No. 2 pick in the draft. Before the Heat's opening game of the season against the Knicks, Miami power forward Michael Beasley talked with *Sporting News*' Bill Eichenberger about his introduction to the league as well as expectations for his first season.

SN: How goes the transition from college to the NBA? (Beasley averaged 26.2 points and 12.4 rebounds for Kansas State last season but went for nine and four in his NBA debut.)

BEASLEY: Not smooth. It's a whole 'nother level. Not just basketball but life. There's nothing bad about it. It's just a little harder than I thought.

SN: What's been most difficult?

BEASLEY: Everything. In college you have some players who are not necessarily supposed to be there. But in the NBA, everybody is here for a reason, even the smallest name. You guard somebody thinking he's nobody. You don't know him, and he gets 25 points. You just have to guard everybody.

SN: Is the challenge greater for you on defense than offense?

BEASLEY: I would think so. My offense stays constant. It's just playing against bigger, stronger and quicker guys. But defense, well, I got switched on a screen with Tony Parker the other night, and the night before I was guarding Chris Paul for a play. It's nonstop on defense.

SN: What has it been like playing with Dwyane Wade, and what have you learned from him?

BEASLEY: It's been fun. That sums it up. He's a hard worker. If you saw him in the gym, you wouldn't think he was a superstar. He works like he's still fighting for a spot. That's what I'm learning from him. Never give up, never sell yourself short. Keep pushing no matter how far you have to go.

SN: Are you getting settled in Miami? Do you like it there?

BEASLEY: Yeah, I like it. I forgot it was wintertime. Honestly... Miami will spoil you with the weather. It's gorgeous. It was cold to us, and it was 65 degrees. You come (to New York), and it's 40. That's crazy.

SN: What's been your most eye-opening moment on the court so far?

BEASLEY: I would say guarding Tim Duncan, playing against him on offense and defense. ... Tim Duncan is somebody I look up to, someone I always admired growing up. Just to take the floor against him, to match up against him, was like, "Wow." At first, it was like, "How am I going to guard this?" But it was fun. He was talking. I was talking.

SN: You think it's fair to say that this first month in the NBA has humbled you a little bit?

BEASLEY: Definitely. College, my first game I had 32 points and 24 rebounds. In college, there were not a whole lot of people who could rebound. Now point guards are grabbing 10 rebounds. It's going to be pretty tough.

SN: Do you have any second thoughts about your earlier pronouncement that wanting to be rookie of the year was not a high enough goal for you, that you wanted to be the league MVP?

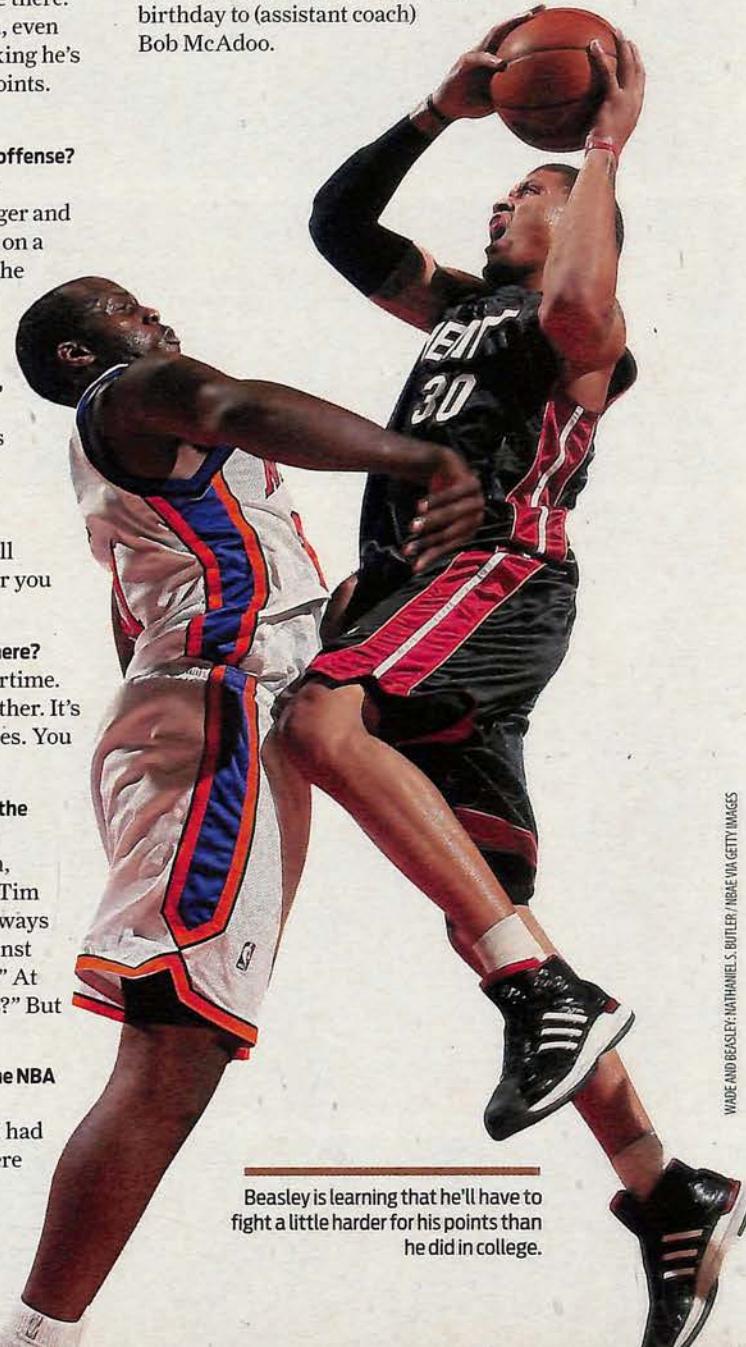
BEASLEY: It's a high goal, but I don't want to sell myself short. I don't see a point in just trying to be the best young guy, the best rookie. I want to be the best, period. ... If you take the floor to be second-best, there is no point in playing. I want to be an All-Star my first year in the NBA. I want to be MVP. I want to do the impossible.

SN: Are you going to be disappointed if you don't reach some of these lofty goals you've set for yourself?

BEASLEY: I don't know what is expected out of me, honestly. I'm a rookie. I'm here to play, here to get along with my teammates. That's pretty much it. I want to win. I'm not expected to score 30 points a night. I've got All-Stars. I have veterans on my team.

SN: Speaking of being a rookie, has there been any hazing? Have they made you do anything crazy?

BEASLEY: I had to enter a dance contest that was not voluntary. I did the Runnin' Man. It wasn't too pretty. ... Plus, I had to sing happy birthday to (assistant coach) Bob McAdoo.



Beasley is learning that he'll have to fight a little harder for his points than he did in college.

Now and then: Even the little things about the game have changed



Rick Barry

Because three of my sons, Jon, Brent and Drew, have played in today's NBA, people often ask me to compare the current state of the game to the way it was when I played in the 1960s and '70s.

Don't even get me started on salaries, publicity, endorsements, perks and lifestyle. There is no comparison. Even the increased size and athleticism of today's players needs no mention. It's obvious. There are, however, a few differences that may not be so apparent.

Dribble-mania

In today's game, the majority of moves made by perimeter players are done off the dribble. The days of a player catching the ball, squaring up to his man, evaluating his weakness and beating him by using his *first* dribble are disappearing as quickly as VCRs. The Nuggets' Carmelo Anthony is one player who still uses this technique. I have nothing against making moves off the dribble. However, I was always taught that a dribble is a pass to yourself. Too much dribbling without a purpose defeats the intent of the skill.

Ineffective pick-and-rolls

This is one of the most basic plays in the game, and although most teams today run some version of it, they do so

ineffectively. Just about every team has a big man coming from the top of the key, area to set a screen—which directs the man with the ball away from the basket. The Celtics' Kevin Garnett sets screens so far out on the court it is ridiculous. The ideal screen should come from the low block area so the thrust of the offense can be toward the basket, creating great scoring opportunities with little time for team defense to react.

The invisible center

How many times have you watched a game and not even seen a true center on the court? The dearth of quality centers in today's game is alarming. A big man with back-to-the-basket skills on offense is a rare commodity. Most of today's centers are really power forwards masquerading as post men.

In the zone

There were no zone defenses allowed back in my day, for which I was grateful. I am not a fan of zones because they do not teach sound, fundamental defense against an individual opponent. A zone also takes away much of the beauty of the game by making it more difficult for a player to use his driving abilities. Thankfully, most NBA teams don't use the zone exclusively. If they did, it would ruin the pro game.

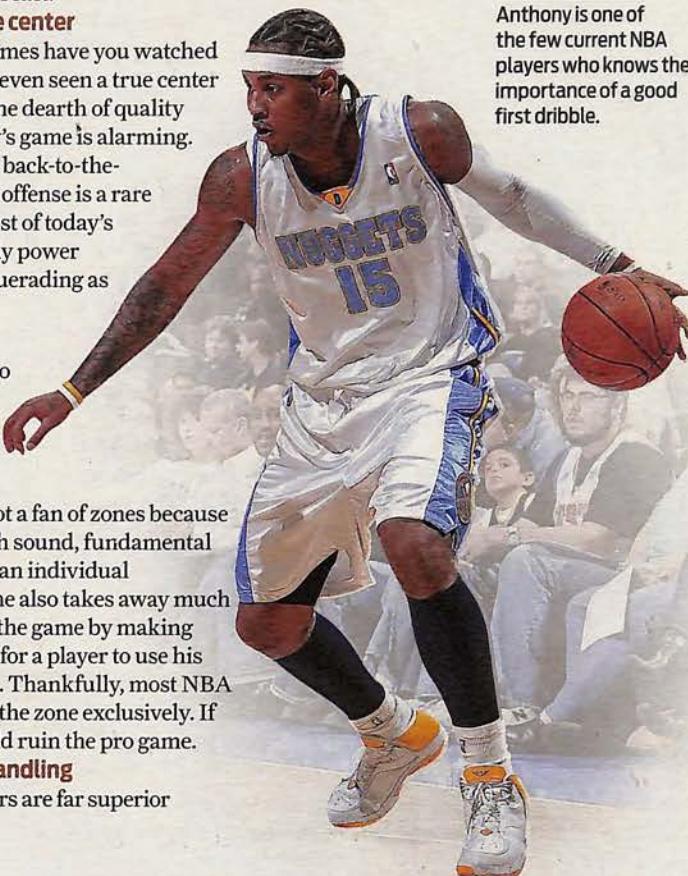
Better ballhandling

Today's players are far superior

ballhandlers than the players of my day. This applies to all positions. In fact, I joke with my 14-year-old son that he is a better ballhandler at his age than I was as an NBA All-Star.

Rick Barry, a 12-time All-Star and member of the Basketball Hall of Fame, is a regular contributor to Sporting News.

Anthony is one of the few current NBA players who knows the importance of a good first dribble.



Posey has won two titles in the past three seasons.

There's nothing crazy about spending money on a glue guy

From superstars (Kevin Garnett) to third-teamers (Devean George), glue guys come in all forms. But what exactly makes a glue guy? Hornets general manager Jeff Bower defines the term: "Every good team has a guy who makes a valuable contribution that maybe gets overlooked by the casual fan, but he helps you win." Perhaps that's why giving a four-year, \$25 million deal to James Posey, a 31-year-old backup who has won rings with the Celtics and Heat, doesn't seem excessive to Bower. He told SN's Stan McNeal why Posey is worth the money:

There have always been guys like James on successful teams. A guy who's not statistically at the top of any list but makes a big contribution to winning. James fits that category.

There's a number of reasons he's a big addition for us:

- He will play a significant role off the bench with his defense and scoring, and he understands how important this role is.
- He has the recent experience of being part of a championship team.
- He can shoot the 3, which helps keep the floor spread, and that is very important for us with Chris Paul.
- His versatility will allow Coach (Byron) Scott to use him at shooting guard, small forward and even some at power forward.
- I understand the comments (about the contract). It all remains to be seen, but we felt he gives us the best chance to improve.

From glamour to grit:

The Lakers' defense has gotten a makeover

It was the one thing missing for the Lakers last season, the deficiency that so clearly showed itself in The Finals loss to the Celtics. They were a team without much muscle. They were, as coach Phil Jackson likes to say, "lanky." When push came to shove, the Lakers got pushed and shoved.

That has changed. The Lakers have welcomed back behemoth young center Andrew Bynum (7-0, 285) from a knee injury, allowing them to move Pau Gasol—a 7-footer but one of the league leaders in lank—back to power forward. Forward Lamar Odom, 6-10, has slid into the sixth man role, giving the Lakers unmatched size throughout the lineup.

"I think, with me and Andrew, the defense becomes harder to deal with," Gasol says. "Having Andrew in the post, with his size, it gives everybody more confidence."

But alterations to the Lakers' D go beyond confidence. Jackson says he spent much of training camp adding new wrinkles to better take advantage of rules changes, and it seemed the Lakers played more zone in their first two games than they did all last season. The focus on defense in training camp also yielded a better, tougher attitude.

"We're talking about defense constantly now," Gasol says. "We thought it was something we could do better. When you look at all of us individually, we have the ability to play good defense. We were not using our ability. If you have the ability, why not use it?"

— Sean Devaney

Worth every penny

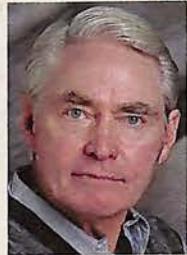
James Posey wasn't the only glue guy who had little trouble finding a job on the free-agent market over the summer. Others who will make a difference this season:

1. **Eduardo Najera, SF, Nets (from Nuggets).** He would just as soon take a charge as hit a 12-footer.
2. **Ronny Turiaf, PF, Warriors (from Lakers).** His strong-hearted inside presence always adds energy.
3. **Roger Mason Jr., SG, Spurs (from Wizards).** Solid on and off the court, he's a prototypical Gregg Popovich player.

— Stan McNeal

BASEBALL

Talk of deals in November will lead to action in December



Fred Claire

If Major League Baseball is concerned about an economic downturn in 2009, it sure is putting up a good front as its executives prepare for next season.

The general managers' meetings got underway this week at the St. Regis Monarch Beach Resort in Dana Point, Calif. (not exactly your local low-budget hotel). The next significant gathering will be the winter meetings, December 8-11 in Las Vegas, with many of the teams' executives holding court at the Bellagio.

Now that we have the details of the expensive itinerary out of the way, what does it all mean to teams and their fans?

You can expect a lot of talk at the G.M. meetings but very little action. Executives haven't had a chance to talk dollars with free agents—there is a 15-day period after the World Series when free agents can negotiate with only their current teams—so general managers try to get a feel for what their colleagues are looking to do in the way of trades. They lay the groundwork for deals that are more likely to happen at the winter meetings.

Let's say you're a G.M. searching for a front-line starting pitcher. You'd want to sit down this week with Padres G.M. Kevin Towers, who appears willing to trade ace righthander Jake Peavy for the right package of young players. Then you have to evaluate whether you can afford to part with the talent Towers is seeking, factoring in that Peavy is 27 and signed to a favorable contract when compared with other pitchers of his age and ability.

The problem is that you don't yet know what free-agent pitchers are seeking in terms of contracts. Sure, CC Sabathia's price will be off the charts, and he likely will use the deal (\$137.5 million for six years) the Mets gave Johan Santana last offseason as a baseline, but there are other free-agent starting pitchers who might fit in your plans.

The winter meetings bring together team owners, a media throng, agents, minor league personnel and representatives of many businesses involved with baseball. You'll also find a large contingent of young

people hoping to break into the business of baseball; they have the freshly scrubbed faces and are the only people who don't look like they need a good night's sleep.

You can count on some key trades and free-agent signings at the winter meetings. Much of this can be dictated by what the owners tell the general managers about how season-ticket and sponsorship sales are going and what team payroll budgets look like for 2009.

If you want any of the big-name players, you had better hope for an owner with deep pockets.

*Fred Claire, a former Dodgers general manager, is a regular contributor to Sporting News. He is also an analyst for MLB.com and the author of *Fred Claire: My 30 Years in Dodger Blue*.*

Best buys

Fred Claire's top five free agents

- 1. 1B Mark Teixeira, Angels
- 2. SP CC Sabathia, Brewers
- 3. CL Francisco Rodriguez, Angels
- 4. OF Manny Ramirez, Dodgers
- 5. SS Rafael Furcal, Dodgers



Ramirez has already proved he fits in well with the Dodgers.

Money sure helps, but it isn't everything

Well before the World Series ended, obscene contract numbers were being bandied about the baseball rumor mill. The Dodgers reportedly were set to give outfielder Manny Ramirez the money he wants—more than \$25 million per season—but not for the six years he's seeking. And rumors had the Yankees prepared to offer CC Sabathia the richest contract ever for a pitcher.

But bigger contracts don't always produce better results, as evidenced by this season's World Series participants. The Rays signed only reliever Troy Percival, outfielder/DH Cliff Floyd and outfielder/first baseman Eric Hinske last offseason; the Phillies' biggest free-agent acquisition was third baseman Pedro Feliz, who didn't exactly break the bank. It's about finding the right fit.

The best bets at each position among the expected free agents:

STARTING PITCHERS

1. CC Sabathia, Brewers. Carsten Charles is going to get boatloads of cash regardless of which contender signs him.
2. A.J. Burnett, Blue Jays*
3. Derek Lowe, Dodgers

RELIEF PITCHERS

1. Francisco Rodriguez, Angels. Baseball's single-season saves king could stay with L.A., but not for a hometown discount.
2. Kerry Wood, Cubs
3. Brian Fuentes, Rockies

FIRST BASEMEN

1. Mark Teixeira, Angels. The big-spending Yankees, Red Sox and Angels all have the need for a switch-hitting first baseman with ample power and Gold Glove pedigree.
2. Adam Dunn, Diamondbacks
3. Jason Giambi, Yankees*

SECOND BASEMEN

1. Orlando Hudson, Diamondbacks. He's the only impact player available at the position. Hudson has speed, a solid bat and a good glove and is a great clubhouse presence.
2. Ray Durham, Brewers
3. Felipe Lopez, Cardinals

SHORTSTOPS

1. Rafael Furcal, Dodgers. He was outstanding in 2008—in the 36 games he played before back troubles.
2. Orlando Cabrera, White Sox
3. Edgar Renteria, Tigers

THIRD BASEMEN

1. Casey Blake, Dodgers. Blake's performance (10 homers in 58 games) with the Dodgers down the stretch, his positional versatility and his durability are pluses.
2. Joe Crede, White Sox
3. Juan Uribe, White Sox

OUTFIELDERS

1. Manny Ramirez, Dodgers. The Dodgers are the favorites to retain his services, but the Yankees have interest.
2. Raul Ibanez, Mariners
3. Bobby Abreu, Yankees

CATCHERS

1. Ivan Rodriguez, Yankees. This is not a market flush with young catchers. Pudge still can handle the bat.
2. Miguel Olivo, Royals*
3. Jason Varitek, Red Sox

—Ryan Fagan

*Has either a player or team option

Speed guns and spreadsheets: The new baseball front office



Todd Jones

Times are a-changing in baseball. For years, the game was so far behind the times that many people perceived Major League Baseball the way people in the South often are viewed: closed-off, narrow-minded, set in their ways. (If you're wondering, I was born in Georgia and went to college in Alabama.)

For a long time—I don't know, perhaps for roughly 100 years—there were "baseball men." And only "baseball men" knew the game. These "baseball men" were lifers who played the game, who bled the game and who were the only ones owners trusted to make baseball decisions.

After all, the owners didn't know baseball; they knew how to make a buck. The "baseball men" were in charge of building the rosters. The "baseball men" would gather in a room, light cigars, get pizza and figure everything out. Only "baseball men" knew the mentality of the players. They knew how to yell at one guy and kiss up to another guy to get the most out of each player. After all, "baseball men" had played the game, and that experience gave them the authority to know what made a ballplayer. On the flip side, owners never asked their "baseball men" to sit in on their Wall Street meetings. This was the narrow-minded, Cro-Magnon mentality that characterized the game for all of those years.

Well, not anymore.

I saw this written on a sign at a Vanderbilt football game, so I can't take credit for it. But I believe it to be true for baseball now, too: "The Geeks Will Inherit The Turf."



Todd Jones, a former major league closer, is a regular contributor to *Sporting News*.

Friedman doesn't look like a "baseball man"—until you consider that he's holding a pretty important trophy.

This renaissance began with A's general manager Billy Beane and *Moneyball*, which started to shed light on the fact that not just "baseball men" knew baseball. Sure, Billy gets more credit than he deserves, but this change in thinking has to be traced back to somewhere. These days, baseball is run by guys who were educated at schools such as Harvard and Yale.

For a prime example, look at Andrew Friedman, the 31-year-old executive vice president of baseball operations for the Tampa Bay Rays. He is part of this new crop of guys who understand the game more mentally than physically. Need more examples? Theo Epstein, the Red Sox's executive vice president/G.M. who went to Yale, might be the most famous. Indians executive vice president/G.M. Mark Shapiro went to Princeton, and Rangers G.M. Jon Daniels went to Cornell. Josh Byrnes isn't an Ivy Leaguer, but he was a Theo guy before becoming executive vice president and G.M. in Arizona.

This is the new breed of talent evaluators, who use not only speed guns but spreadsheets. They might not be minor league-tested, but they're business-tested. And they are leading the way in a trend that can't be stopped.

Owners want to win, and even if the old "baseball men" don't want to accept this new perspective, they'd better at least learn how to analyze the numbers as well as scout the players. Baseball on the field is about adjustments. These days, so is baseball in the front office.

2009 Power Poll

Now that the Phillies have been crowned champions and the book has been closed on the 2008 season, it's time to look ahead to 2009. The teams to beat—as well as the easiest team to beat—from each league:

American League

1 Red Sox. With righthander Josh Beckett (oblique) and DH David Ortiz (wrist) at less than full strength and without third baseman Mike Lowell (hip) at all, they still came within a Game 7 victory of their third World Series appearance in five years.

2 Rays. Life is good when your biggest issue is figuring out which promising young starter will lose his rotation spot to make room for lefthanded phenom David Price.



David Ortiz

3 Angels. They're likely to lose closer Francisco Rodriguez and/or first baseman Mark Teixeira in free agency. But even if they slip by 10 games, they'll be a 90-win team.

4 Yankees. Perhaps they can get a group rate from agent Scott Boras for Teixeira, outfielder Manny Ramirez and righthander Derek Lowe. They'll need all three—plus lefthander CC Sabathia—to finish any higher.

5 Twins. As usual, they'll find a way. It helps having the three J's—catcher Joe Mauer, first baseman Justin Morneau and closer Joe Nathan—and the game's most underappreciated manager, Ron Gardenhire.

The bottom one:

Mariners. A new G.M. and manager won't be enough to offset a rotation that won an A.L.-worst 36 games and posted a 5.07 ERA.

National League

1 Phillies. Lefthander Cole Hamels, first baseman Ryan Howard, second baseman Chase Utley and shortstop Jimmy Rollins form a homegrown core as talented as any in the majors. And they haven't even reached their prime.

2 Cubs. They're as balanced and as deep as any club—in the regular season, anyway.

3 Astros. They were the National League's best team in the second half, and that was without outfielder Carlos Lee for the final 46 games.

4 Diamondbacks. No team has a better top of the rotation than righthanders Brandon Webb and Dan Haren. They just need their young players, including outfielders Justin Upton and Chris Young, to play up to their potential.

5 Mets. With a core of third baseman David Wright, shortstop Jose Reyes and outfielder Carlos Beltran (plus Francisco Rodriguez?), they have too much talent to keep falling short of the postseason.

The bottom one:

Padres. An offense with little speed (or power) and a pitching staff that could be sans ace Jake Peavy is not a recipe for success at Petco Park.

Intermission Interview

with Sabres goalie Ryan Miller

SN: What are you seeing from your teammates that has helped the team get off to a good start?

MILLER: We did a good job of just committing to playing good defense and playing as a team. That's really what the difference is in the NHL right now. Teams are hunkering down, killing the rushes, and there's not a lot of open ice. Games are getting a little boring. We play good defense and have the puck a lot more. We create more offense than we did last year.

SN: The front office focused on getting key players signed long term this summer. What did that mean to you and your teammates?

MILLER: You feel good. It's a good group of guys coming together. They worked hard to get where they are. It's good that the team recognized that and understood that we have a good attitude about us. We work hard and want to go out and win. With that in place, you start building around that attitude.

SN: Does a strong start ease the pressure over the rest of the season?

MILLER: It's definitely good to get off to a good start, where you can prove that you can put together a conscious effort to play a certain system and have it be effective. As teams adjust and people scout us out a little more, we'll have to consistently make adjustments.

— Craig Custance

Miller says the Sabres' attitude has been one of the biggest reasons for their fast start.



Anderson had to wait for his Hall call, but much of next year's class won't

By Craig Custance

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It took a little longer than he had hoped, but when word came that Glenn Anderson was being inducted into hockey's Hall of Fame, the wait didn't matter.

Only Joe Sakic and Maurice "Rocket" Richard have more than Anderson's five overtime playoff goals, and his 93 career playoff goals secures his status as one of hockey's best clutch performers. That—and his nine seasons with 30 or more goals—became the selling point for supporters who have pleaded his case since his retirement in 1996.

"I didn't have a lot of control (over) it, but the outburst of support I had from family, friends and teammates from all walks of life was really overwhelming," says Anderson, who played most of his career with the Oilers.

Anderson and Russian great Igor Larionov are the only players who will be inducted during ceremonies in Toronto on November 10. Larionov was a member of Detroit's Russian Five and part of three Stanley Cup winners with the Red Wings—after playing his early career in Russia.

With Anderson's and Larionov's Hall of Fame status secure, it's time to look ahead to an all-star 2009 player class that includes four first-ballot locks:

1. Steve Yzerman. Known simply as The Captain, Yzerman is a Hockeytown institution. He scored 692 regular-season goals and was the heart and soul behind three Stanley Cup winners (1997, 1998 and 2002). He also was the Red Wings' captain for two decades and moved into the Detroit front office as vice president after retirement. "What's amazing to everyone is he changed his game to make sure he'd win Stanley Cups," says former teammate Luc Robitaille. "He became this ultimate leader, ultimate winner. It was amazing."



2. Brett Hull. Only Gordie Howe and Wayne Gretzky have scored more than Hull's 741 career goals, which makes Hull one of the top snipers to play the game. He won Stanley Cups with Dallas and Detroit and was an important member of USA Hockey, helping win the World Cup in 1996 and a silver medal at the 2002 Olympics. He won the Hart Trophy in 1991 after scoring 86 goals. "He's probably the purest goal scorer to play the game," Robitaille says. "Everybody will talk forever about his release."

3. Brian Leetch. Another important member of USA Hockey, Leetch became the only American-born player to win a Conn Smythe Trophy when he led the Rangers to the 1994 Stanley Cup. The general manager of that

Rangers team, Neil Smith, says Leetch and Ray Bourque were the dominant defensemen of their era. "(Leetch) was the most instrumental player in the '94 playoffs in us winning," Smith says. "Obviously, (Mark) Messier's leadership and all were a huge part of it, but as far as on-ice performance goes, nobody played better than Brian in the '94 playoffs."

4. Luc Robitaille. Robitaille is the third player on this list to finish as a top 10 career goal scorer. He came up the hard way, a ninth-round pick downgraded by scouts who questioned his skating ability.

Not only is he one of the great goal scorers in history, he helped make hockey popular in California before Wayne Gretzky arrived in L.A. "As a kid, I just wanted to play hockey and play in the NHL," he says. "To even have my name mentioned to get into the Hall of Fame—it's not something I set out to do. ... But that's the ultimate capper on the career."

Anderson got in the Hall with some clutch goals. Next year's class will include more high-volume scorers.

Roommate Confidential

Flyers forward Mike Knuble hasn't had a road trip roommate since the lockout, the benefit of being a veteran. But with plenty of trips under his 12-year NHL belt, Knuble knows the difference between a good roommate and a bad one.

► **Best roommate:** "I roomed with (San Jose forward) Joe Thornton for a while. That was a lot of fun. He always had a lot of stuff going on—let's say it that way. There always seemed to be a certain excitement that followed Joe around."

► **Worst roommate:** "I wouldn't want to name names, but I had a roommate who smoked, and another one, I got rid of him after one weekend because he was a little bit crazy. I said he was snoring and keeping me up, and that got me out of it, which is the old standby. If you don't like your roommate, just say (he snores)."

► **Switching roommates:** "When I played in Boston under Mike Keenan, we had different roommates every road trip, so you roomed with everybody on the team that year. I didn't care for that because I don't think certain guys are meant to be roommates. ... The last thing you want to worry about is going to your room at night and wondering if you're going to be able to sleep or searching for earplugs to drown out the guy watching movies until 5 in the morning."

— Craig Custance

Semin isn't trying any harder—he's just getting better results

By Craig Custance

ccustance@sportingnews.com

The annoyed tone in Mark Gandler's voice was obvious. He had heard the criticism before, and as the agent for Capitals forward Alexander Semin, it's his job to dispel it.

When it was suggested the 24-year-old fourth-year forward is just now reaching his potential because of better effort, Gandler flinched. And not just because he's a guy who gets a percentage of each contract Semin signs.

He has known Semin since he was 16. He sat in the stands with Semin's father, a hockey coach, during games in Russia and watched the maturation of a young player. He's someone who would disagree with the criticism, regardless of whether he was getting paid to.

In Gandler's eyes, the suggestion that Semin's effort is finally matching his skills is unfair.

"It is absolutely untrue," Gandler says. "Those who say that, I think they don't know him."

Semin isn't easy to know. For one thing, his English is extremely limited, though Washington coach Bruce Boudreau says he senses Semin's understanding of the language far surpasses his ability to speak it. All interviews with the North American media are done through an interpreter—when he does them at all.

Sometimes he gets caught. "What time does bus leave?" he'll ask, not realizing there's a reporter in the room.

Here's the other thing about Semin: He's shy. Not reclusive-in-Siberia shy; if he's going to diss Sidney Crosby, he can't be *that* shy. But he doesn't like confrontation, which rules out defending himself against critics. And he typically doesn't crave attention—even though that's exactly what he's about to get.

The other Alex in Washington has emerged, so far anyway, as the more productive Alex. Semin had 16 points in the Capitals' first 10 games, more than tripling teammate Alex Ovechkin's output during that same stretch.

Semin is becoming the player everyone expected him to become when he scored 38 goals in his second NHL season. For those around him, that's no surprise. He's a different player than Ovechkin, though his skill level has always matched that of his more famous teammate. Some suggest it surpasses Ovechkin's.

Why it's just now being realized in the NHL—well, that's up for debate.

"Sometimes as you grow older, you mature a little bit," Boudreau says. "I see that more than anything. He's like a highlight reel when he wants to play. He's giving it more effort, every day this year, than he's done in the past."

There's that word. *Effort*.

Gandler hates it. He points out Semin's injuries last season. There was a serious ankle sprain that never totally healed during the season. Nagging shoulder and tailbone injuries made things worse.

"He just kept coming back too early," Gandler says.

With his health improving, teammates noticed a physical edge to Semin's game in the playoffs, but his best work came in May's World Championships, when he helped Russia win a gold medal with a team-leading 13 points in nine games.

His production this season is a continuation of that success.

"Younger players will have ups and downs," says Sergei Fedorov, Semin's teammate with Russia and in Washington. "It's hard for everybody to put the same effort out there every day. But I know one thing: He's trying, and he's playing the game with his heart."



Semin is outplaying his more famous teammate so far this season.

SEMIN: BOB LEVERONE/SI; IGHLIA: JOHN RUSSELL/NHLI/GETTY IMAGES; DUBINSKY: BOB LEVERONE/SI

Brandon Dubinsky



Scouts' Views: Brandon Dubinsky

At age 22, Rangers forward Brandon Dubinsky is one reason his team has emerged as a serious contender in the Eastern Conference. He posted 40 points in his first full season, and now he's scoring at almost a point-per-game pace. An NHL scout breaks down Dubinsky's game:

► **What I like:** "I'm really amazed by him. I started noticing him when he first came up to the Rangers. He's got tremendous determination and plays

extremely hard. He's not gifted as a great skater, but he works so hard that he gets there. Obviously, he has some pretty good skills to go along with that, but the thing I like is how hard he goes. He's physical, he's good on the forecheck, and he's always on you so quickly that it's hard to play against him."

► **What needs work:** "He needs to learn when to push on the throttle and when not to. He's

STICK FIGURES

The NHL season, by the numbers

7 Potential unrestricted free agents the Red Wings have on their roster, including stars Henrik Zetterberg, Marian Hossa and Johan Franzen. When you hear G.M. Ken Holland refer to this season as a one-year window to win another Cup, that's why.

2 Total points Calgary winger Jarome Iginla registered in his first four games of the season. The Flames were 1-2-1.

8 Total points Iginla scored in the next four games. The Flames went 3-1.



Jarome Iginla

34.4 Shifts per game Philadelphia defenseman Kimmo Timonen averaged through the first 10 games of the season—the most in the league. In second place? Teammate Braydon Coburn with 32.8 shifts.

12 Points, including six goals, 21-year-old forward Bobby Ryan, Anaheim's top prospect, scored in his first 11 games for the Iowas after being sent to the AHL by the Ducks, a move necessitated by salary cap issues.

37,000 Hot dogs the NHL estimates were consumed by its fans on October 25, the only day this season all 30 teams will play.

70 Points Ottawa forward Daniel Alfredsson needs to score in 70 games this season to opt out of his contract and become an unrestricted free agent. So far, he has three goals and seven assists in 10 games.

8 Consecutive games to open the season in which Ottawa defenseman Filip Kuba assisted on goals, breaking the record for defensemen held by Boston's Brad Park.

— Craig Custance

going all out every minute, and he needs to pick his spots better. He'll learn to pick his spot and not go charging like a bull every single shift. Not to say you don't play with intensity, but you don't want (opponents) to know every single time out there what they're going to get. Right now he's in the mode that, 'I have to go (all) out every shift on the ice.'

— Craig Custance

NASCAR

Q&A with Chad Knaus

There is no crew chief in the garage more adept at planning and executing race strategy and making critical decisions on the fly than Chad Knaus. Knaus shared the approach that has made him an indispensable part of Johnson's Sprint Cup championships with *Sporting News*' Reid Spencer.

SN: How do you plan your race strategy?

KNAUS: I look at the past history of what kinds of races have been produced at the tracks. At a lot of racetracks, you can kind of watch and see the tire fall off and when the car starts to be difficult to control. That's when cautions usually fall. At tracks where it's very physically taxing—say a Dover or a Darlington, a place like that ... Bristol—you can almost plan off that.

SN: Has the introduction of NASCAR's new racecar changed the way you plan a race?

KNAUS: There's definitely been a difference. The severity of the cautions, I'd say, really hasn't changed a whole lot, but the frequency has dropped just a little bit. For instance, at Martinsville we had about a 110- or 112-lap run, which is very uncharacteristic of that racetrack.

SN: After the Martinsville race, which Johnson won, you mentioned a decision not to pit that had cost you a race in 2003. Are things like that etched in your memory?

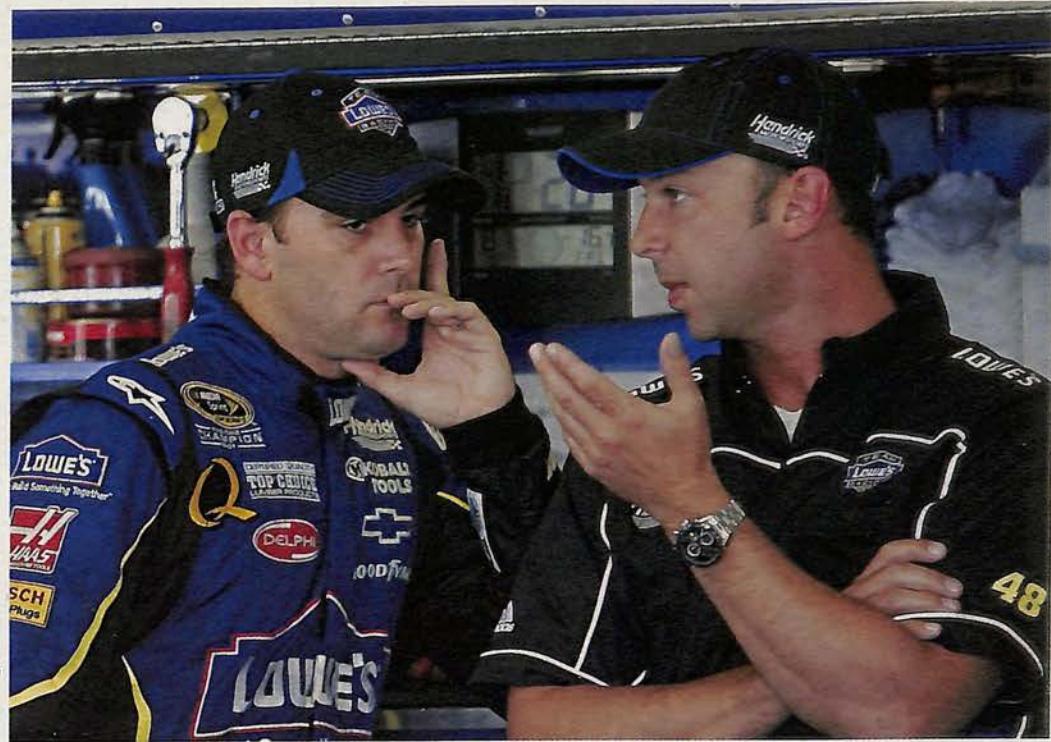
KNAUS: There are certain things that really stick with you. Obviously, giving up a race like that at Martinsville is something that you remember. It hurts. So I pay attention to where we make mistakes and try to avoid them happening again.

SN: When something unexpected happens, such as an ill-timed caution or an unusually long green-flag run, how do you adjust?

KNAUS: You just kind of take it as it comes. You just got to kind of shoot from the hip, and whatever the situation is, you've got to adapt. You have to lay out a bunch of different scenarios and situations in your mind. You have to be mentally prepared for them, of course. But to try to predict what's going to happen in a race ... you just can't do it. So you just have to be prepared for all situations to the best of your ability and go from there.

SN: When the season comes down to the final few races, and you have a sizable lead in the standings and know where you need to finish to clinch the championship, does that change your approach?

KNAUS: Quite honestly, we want to win the championship, and that's first and foremost on our minds, but we're competitors and we want to win races, so it's not very difficult to stay focused. If I spent time on what position we had to finish in those scenarios, I wouldn't be spending the time working on the racecar like I need to be.



Johnson (left) and Knaus know each other so well that it doesn't take a whole lot of talking to communicate.

Jimmie Johnson: The view of Knaus from the driver's seat

After his stunning second-place run at Atlanta—when he made up nine positions in the final eight laps following a late-race caution—Jimmie Johnson talked about the evolution of his relationship with crew chief Chad Knaus.

We're still very, very similar to the way we were when we started in a lot of ways. I think, from the beginning, Chad and I have been able to communicate well. We just kind of fit well together. Over time, it continues to amaze me how well he knows me.

I guess, Saturday night (before the Atlanta race) I made a couple of general comments about the car, just in passing and talking about something. He called me a couple of hours later—and just on some comments that I felt were insignificant. Talking about what the car was doing pulled him back to some different races during the course of the season and some changes we made to help the car.

And the light came on in his brain and it pieced everything together, and so that Saturday night we felt

very good about the changes we were making to the car. It made the car better.

I think over time we've just gained more confidence in our gut feelings, with the car, with one another and those decisions. We've followed those gut feelings, and they've really turned out to be something.

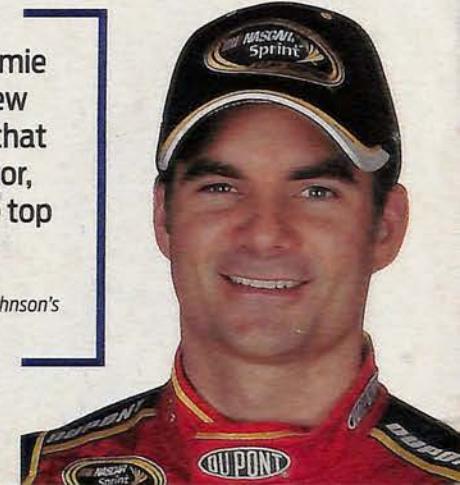
I'd rather him make the calls so that I can yell at him on Monday, rather than him yell at me. In most cases, he's got such a better perspective of what's going on, I try to keep my opinions relatively to myself. And in the past, too, I've made pit calls that have been wrong more times than right. In today's racing, in my opinion, you really need to be a computer for the crew chief and tell him what it's doing, not tell him how to fix it, because there's a lot more going on than a driver can sort out.

Each year that goes by, and each time we deal with a high-pressure situation, it just builds more confidence, but we've had this ability for a long time. We just keep refining it.

—As told to Reid Spencer

I'm just blown away by how great of a driver Jimmie has become at this level and how great of a crew chief Chad Knaus has become, as well knowing that he worked on the No. 24 car years ago. Fabricator, pit crew member—and now here he is, one of the top crew chiefs that there's ever been.

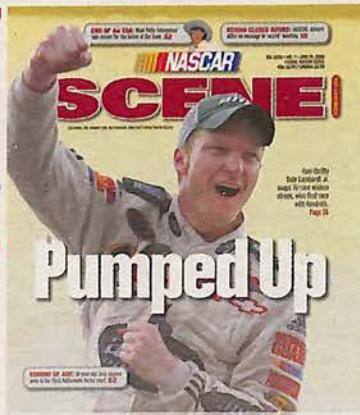
—Jeff Gordon, four-time Cup champion and owner of Johnson's No. 48 Hendrick Motorsports Chevrolet



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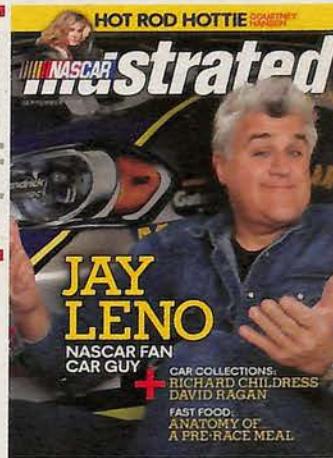
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Double duty is fine, but second place isn't so special

Ranking the rookies—what's left of them, anyway

NASCAR's 2008 Sprint Cup rookie class shrank more rapidly than the global economy this year. What started as a medley of international open-wheel stars ended up as a two-step, with only Dale Earnhardt Inc.'s Regan Smith and Penske's Sam Hornish racing full time as the season nears its end. *Sporting News* ranks the performances of the Raybestos Rookie of the Year candidates, which include all the drivers who started the season as rookies, except for Jacques Villeneuve, who exited the Cup Series after failing to qualify for the season-opening Daytona 500.

1. Regan Smith.

Though he'll remember this season for the win that could have been—had NASCAR not penalized him for passing Tony Stewart below the yellow line at Talladega in October—Smith has finished every race he has run and has kept his car in the top 35 in owner points, the foremost goal for a rookie.



Regan Smith

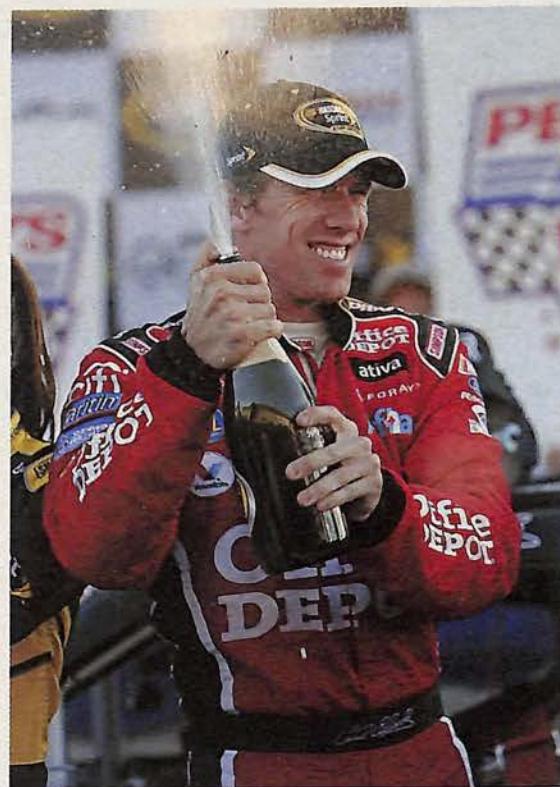
2. Sam Hornish. Not as consistent as Smith, Hornish has crashed out of four races and failed to qualify for the October event at Talladega. After Texas, his No. 77 Dodge was 37th in owner points and unlikely to crack the top 35.

3. Patrick Carpentier. Though he won a pole in the No. 10 Gillett Evernham Dodge at New Hampshire, Carpentier's race results—an average finish of 29.6—and lack of sponsorship ultimately cost him his ride.

4. Michael McDowell. Yanked from the No. 00 Michael Waltrip Racing Toyota for two stretches during the season, McDowell is now out of the ride that became the No. 47 car driven by Marcos Ambrose. McDowell will be remembered best for walking away unharmed from his horrific qualifying crash at Texas in April, a wreck that validated the enhanced safety features of NASCAR's new racecar.

5. Dario Franchitti. Franchitti had little chance to prove himself before Chip Ganassi Racing shuttered the No. 40 Dodge team on July 1 for lack of sponsorship. An ankle injury suffered at Talladega in April sidelined the former IndyCar and Indianapolis 500 champ for five races, further limiting his Cup appearances.

—Reid Spencer



Edwards' Cup win at Atlanta came a day after a Nationwide victory in Memphis.

On whether running the Nationwide Series full time benefits the Cup Series effort: "You know, right off the bat when I first started running both of them in 2005, I was certain it helped me. I mean, it was 100 percent beneficial for Sundays. As I've gone along, it's not been a benefit for the same reasons. You know, now it's different. It was that I was getting experience racing on the racetrack, racing around these guys."

"Now I feel like I have enough experience with that stuff that the benefit for me is just the competitive outlet on Saturdays. Winning that race at Memphis, I believe it put a little spring in my step and made Sunday go better."

On the physical grind of racing in different cities on the same weekend: "It's something I thought would be really tough at the beginning. In a way, (the Atlanta-Memphis double) couldn't have been simpler. Going back and forth from Sonoma (Calif.) to Milwaukee, you maybe miss just a little bit of sleep."

"Bobby East practiced and qualified over there in Memphis in the Nationwide car. All I had to do is show up and jump in and race. So that weekend is actually less grueling than going back and forth and practicing all day Friday. The result was still good. The weekends (with companion races) where I'll be going back and forth from garage to garage on Friday, those are the ones that take a little bit out of you. But really the racing on Saturday is a short enough race, and it's fun enough. You've got enough time to rest before Sunday that it doesn't take much out of you."

On the possibility of finishing second in both series this year: "I'll let you know how I feel after it's done. If we win, we win. If we don't, we don't. But right now, my focus is going out here and doing the best we can to win."

—Reid Spencer

Ragan's best racing is still to come—just ask him

In his second full season, David Ragan, 22, fell just short of qualifying for the Chase for the NASCAR Sprint Cup. Ragan says to expect the No. 6 Ford team, which will add UPS as primary sponsor, to produce even better results in 2009.

I've progressed a lot, and, really, my first season last year in the Sprint Cup Series—and in the Nationwide Series—that was my first full-time season since I ran a Legends Car full time in '02 and '03. I didn't have a full year of trucks, didn't have a full year of ARCA, didn't have a full year of Hooters Pro Cup or anything like that, so basically, I jumped out of a Legends Car, ran a couple of ARCA races and went Cup racing. Things moved very fast. I had to be a quick learner.

We are disappointed we didn't make the Chase. We feel like we've got a top 10, top 12 race team, but it's just a few certain races, if we could take back, we'd love to do it.

If you look back at the majority of the mile-and-a-halves, we've been very strong. We've been great at the superspeedways, so if we can just continue to work on our flat-track programs and just tie up the loose ends, I think we're going to be a top five contender.

—As told to Reid Spencer



Ragan believes he just needs a little more practice to make a big impact in the Cup Series.

The GARAGE

Are there even bigger Chase changes ahead?

With the Chase for the NASCAR Sprint Cup going down to the final race in each of its first four years, there had been little talk about making big changes to NASCAR's playoff format.

Until this year.

► Jimmie Johnson held a 106-point lead with two races left, and NASCAR faced the outside possibility Johnson could clinch the title before the season finale at Homestead-Miami Speedway. Johnson's dominance has sparked debate over whether NASCAR should tweak its format to ensure a closer championship race.

Before 2004, the Cup championship was determined by total points accumulated during an entire season. Beginning in 2004, 10 teams qualified for the Chase based on their performance in the first 26 races. Those teams had their points reset after 26 events and raced for the title at the final 10 tracks.

After 2006, NASCAR made two minor changes, expanding the Chase field from 10 to 12 teams and changing the way drivers are seeded going into the Chase. Now, some want to see a more major revision.

Among the ideas proposed are giving each driver a mulligan or two during the Chase and putting the 12 drivers under a different points system for the final 10 races.

Under the first scenario, each driver would get to throw out the results from his worst race or two during the Chase. The second scenario would keep the points race tight by awarding points in small increments based on where each driver finished in relation to other Chase drivers. (For instance, the top Chase driver would get 12 points, the second 11 and so forth.)

After his victory at Atlanta left him 183 points behind Johnson, Carl Edwards and team owner Jack Roush both lobbied for a mulligan.

"It's more exciting if you're able to go as hard as you can until you (use your mulligan)," Roush said.

"You can take bigger risks if you haven't used your mulligan," Edwards added.

► Roush Fenway Racing has 10 victories this season—three more than Hendrick Motorsports—and placed three of its five drivers in the Chase. It could be even stronger next season with Ford Motor Co. pumping more money into the organization.

Ford announced a contract extension with Roush last month and has confirmed it is cutting back its financial and technical support to NASCAR Nationwide and Truck Series teams to spend more money on its Cup program.

Martin may end up getting an early start on next season before this one finishes.

Though Ford also backs Yates Racing and Wood Brothers Racing, most of its Sprint Cup money will go to Roush.

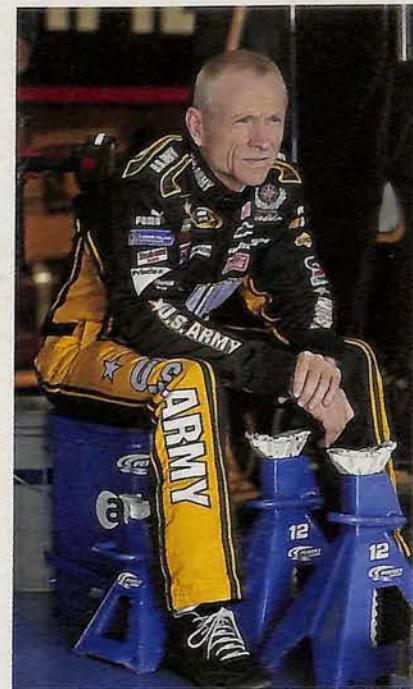
"Our prime goal was really to protect our performance in Cup racing," says Brian Wolfe, director of Ford Racing Technology. "I really believe from the superpowers in NASCAR, the Roush Fenway organization is the best, period, bar none."

► Mark Martin and Casey Mears could wind up joining their new organizations as early as the season finale at Homestead.

Mears is moving to Richard Childress Racing next year, and Martin is set to replace him in Hendrick Motorsports' No. 5 Chevrolet. Both drivers already have tested with their new teams, and Martin says he would like to take it a step further.

"Since we don't get on the racetrack in December or the first half of January, it would give us a chance to sort of find out what we need to focus on," Martin says.

Mears is slated to drive RCR's No. 07 car next season, with Clint Bowyer, the team's current driver, moving to Childress' new No. 33 team. Mears could drive the No. 33 at Homestead, or, with Bowyer currently sixth in the Chase and out of championship contention, the two could simply switch rides and crews.



"If there was an option to go with the team that I'm going to be with next year ... that would be of value to me," Mears says.

► Bowyer and crew chief Gil Martin have made the Chase two straight years, but with Bowyer moving to the No. 33 team, he had to go shopping for a new crew chief. He didn't have to go far. He found one in-house in Shane Wilson.

Wilson was a crew chief for Penske Racing until 2006, when he moved to RCR and won the Nationwide Series championship as crew chief for Kevin Harvick. Martin will stay with the No. 07 team and work with Mears.

PIT BOX

Two Speeds are better than one

Former Formula One driver Scott Speed's Sprint Cup debut (October 19 at Martinsville) gave NASCAR a second, unrelated, driver named Speed. The first, Lake Speed, started 402 Cup races from 1980 through 1998, won one race and achieved his career-best points finish of 10th in 1985. Sam Hornish, who shares a go-karting background with both drivers, and Lake Speed himself say it's too early to compare the two, though.

Q: Who will have the more productive career, Lake Speed or Scott Speed?

LAKESPEED: "It's hard to tell. A lot of people came to Sprint Cup racing with great credentials in other forms of racing only to not do so well here. ... It seems to take different skills and abilities to be very good at the Cup level. But I wish Scott a lot of success."

HORNISH: "I guess it depends on how you measure success. Lake Speed was the last American to win the Karting World Championship back in 1978. I think Scott Speed will probably be remembered more, especially for his off-track style, whether it be clothes or painted toenails. He will definitely bring something to NASCAR, and time will tell who has the better record."

— Reid Spencer



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COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Ranking the rivalries

History, proximity, relevancy ... they are all factors in what makes a great matchup great, but sometimes it just comes down to passion

Go ahead and play for your cozy little trophies. Play for bragging rights and a recruiting edge and all the other things that make college football rivalries the essence of the sport.

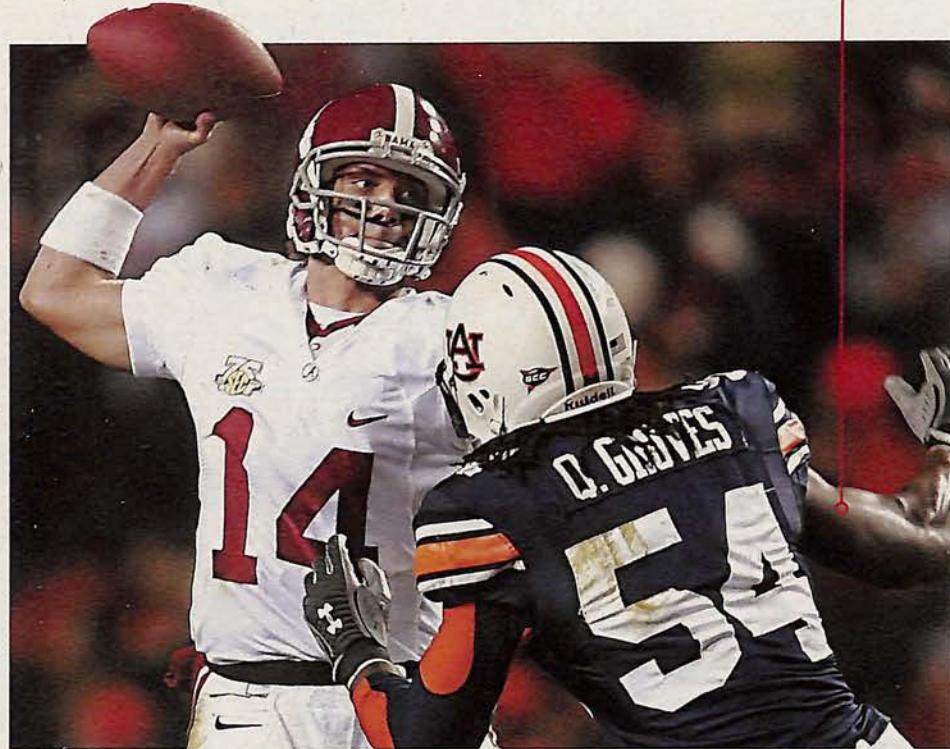
Down in Alabama, they play for a heckuva lot more. A state consumed by the game, by the sheer hate for each other, can bottle up the emotion only so long. One day isn't long enough to justify the utter enormity of the Iron Bowl, of Alabama vs. Auburn.

This isn't about football teams or universities. It's about being born into this wonderful world and choosing sides on Day 1, so help you God, and living and dying every late November. With rivalry week closing in, *Sporting News* college football columnist Matt Hayes ranks his top 20 college football rivalries and members of the Legends Football Coaches Association give their two cents.

- 1 Alabama vs. Auburn
- 2 Michigan vs. Ohio State
- 3 Harvard vs. Yale
- 4 Army vs. Navy
- 5 Notre Dame vs. USC
- 6 Oklahoma vs. Texas
- 7 Florida vs. Florida State
- 8 Texas vs. Texas A&M
- 9 Alabama vs. Tennessee
- 10 Florida vs. Georgia
- 11 USC vs. UCLA
- 12 Stanford vs. California
- 13 Miami vs. Florida State
- 14 Oklahoma vs. Oklahoma State
- 15 Colorado vs. Nebraska
- 16 Pittsburgh vs. West Virginia
- 17 Oregon vs. Oregon State
- 18 Kansas vs. Missouri
- 19 Minnesota vs. Wisconsin
- 20 Clemson vs. South Carolina



Auburn holds the Iron Bowl trophy for now ...



... but the Tigers might find it a little tougher to beat John Parker Wilson and Alabama this year.

What the legends say

"When you look at 20 rivalries, they change every year as to which one is bigger or better. But Harvard-Yale, no matter who they are, that's a big one. From a length standpoint, HARVARD-YALE is No. 1. Matt doesn't make many mistakes, but I caught him in one here."

— Dick MacPherson, former Syracuse coach

"It all depends where you live, but you'd have a hard time convincing people around here that BYU-UTAH is not bigger than any of those."

— LaVell Edwards, former BYU coach

"Hey Matt, after last year's game (excessive celebration), GEORGIA VS. FLORIDA should be ranked at the top!"

— Vince Dooley, former Georgia coach

"You left WASHINGTON VS. WASHINGTON STATE out. In the last 50 years, the Apple Cup had much more impact on West Coast football and the Rose Bowl than either Cal-Stanford or Oregon-Oregon State. I also didn't think that a team being mentioned with more than one rivalry should be in there when others were left out."

— Don James, former Washington coach

"I covered the Alabama-Tennessee game for three years for CBS Sports. While it's a great game, it pales in comparison to the UCLA-USC game. After all, when the game is over fans go to two different states in one game and in the other they share the same city. It's not hard to figure out which one is more fun if you win and which one is tougher to take if you lose! Just imagine Tennessee and Alabama people living in the same city and that gives you a flavor of the UCLA-SC game."

— Terry Donahue, former UCLA coach

"The ranking of these rivalries is up to anyone's background, where they live. There would have to be some criteria to make a valid comparison—factors such as number of years, balance of outcomes, attendance, number of times televised, size of state, national implications. I have participated in three of them: USC-UCLA, USC-Notre Dame, and I coached in the TEXAS A&M-TEXAS game 30 times. ... Because of the tremendous love of football in the state of Texas and the quality of the high school football here, this game is very important in this state."

— R.C. Slocum, former Texas A&M coach

"I can't believe you wouldn't have ARIZONA-ARIZONA STATE on the list. When I first came here, I was awed by the animosity between the two institutions ... geographically, academically, socially and politically. In 1958, Arizona State College wanted to change to Arizona State University and it went to a vote because the board of regents was predominantly U of A affiliated. It was Proposition 200, and it was a major deal here. Sun Devil Stadium was built, and it was our first year in it, and somebody from down south, I suspect, burned big block letters (on the field): 'No 200!' Anything above the Gila River was Arizona State College and everything south was U of A. Your list is definitely lacking without that rivalry on it."

— Frank Kush, former Arizona State coach

"The WEST VIRGINIA-PITT rivalry, they're 75 miles up the road and we're both in the same league now. For that section of the country, that's a big, big rivalry. For that region, they would consider it the best rivalry in the country. But I'm sure the others are good rivalries, too. Throughout the nation, it's probably rated about where it should be."

— Don Nehlen, former West Virginia coach

Ringer is a winner in every sense of the word

By Dave Curtis
dcurtis@sportingnews.com

The son of two Pentecostal ministers, Michigan State senior Javon Ringer received a few extra childhood doses of "Do unto others." So amid building a college career as one of the nation's most productive and durable running backs, he has sprinkled in enough giving to trump those athletic accomplishments.

"He's a great player, but he's a way better person," MSU left tackle Rocco Cironi says. "I'm going to tell my kids about him when they're growing up. I'm going to say, 'Be like Javon was.'"

Cironi was among the offensive linemen who stood behind Ringer in a press conference as he credited them for his 39-carry, 201-yard, two-touchdown afternoon in September against Notre Dame. Cironi has watched Ringer set the Spartans' tempo year-round, especially in the weight room, where he squats 620 pounds and lifts with more ferocity than any of his teammates.

And then there's the story of Natalie Freiburger. In December, Ringer, four other Spartans athletes and men's basketball coach Tom Izzo went to nearby Charlotte, Mich., for a breakfast to benefit 11-year-old Natalie, a Michigan



State fan who was struggling with ovarian cancer. Ringer and Natalie bonded that day, a moment her father called "a dream come true" for his daughter. The MSU star tracked Natalie's progress through a website her family ran, and when Natalie died five weeks later, Ringer and the players returned for her wake.

"You hear so much about athletes these days and how they act," says Chris Freiburger, Natalie's father. "But you could tell it was extremely heartfelt from Javon. It was really refreshing."

Ringer has kept Natalie's memory close by including her in his pregame prayer and visiting with the family at Spartan Stadium after

Ringer is popular with Spartans fans as much for his giving personality as his touchdown runs.

the Notre Dame victory. He has also grown close to two local boys who are fighting cancer, meeting with them and recording a public service announcement before a fundraiser for their care.

"It's such an inspiration for me," Ringer says. "It's amazing how you can feel if you just go a little bit out of your way to do something good for somebody. To see those kids, and what they're going through, and they're smiling all the time? It really has an effect on you."

Pick your poison

Two Ohio natives, Ohio State junior Chris Wells and Michigan State senior Javon Ringer, rank among the nation's best running backs. Ringer nearly became a Buckeye, but he couldn't get in to Ohio State because of grades. A year later, Jim Tressel wound up with Wells instead.

So who's better? You decide:



WELLS



RINGER

Lone Buckeye to participate in veteran and young player summer conditioning sessions before the 2008 season.

Workout wonder

A black belt in karate, he can go from flat on his back to a standing position without using his hands.

Durability: ankle, hand and toe injuries.

Concern for the pros

Size: 5-9, 202.

Wisconsin's. He has 337 rushing yards (7.8 yards per carry) and four touchdowns in two games against UW.

Favorite defense

Notre Dame's. Over four games, he has rushed for 445 yards (5.4 yards per carry) and scored three TDs (one receiving).

Spokesperson. Nobody talks Beanie better than Paulette Wells, who clued the public into the extent of her son's early-season toe injury.

Mom's role

Date. Darlene Ringer and Javon frequented mother-son dances when he was in high school, with Javon even springing for dinner.

— Dave Curtis

PLAYER TO WATCH

Oklahoma State QB Zac Robinson



The numbers: Robinson ranks second in the nation in passing efficiency, behind another in-state QB, Tulsa's David Johnson. Robinson has completed 129 of 187 passes for 2,082 yards, 20 TDs and five interceptions and has a 192.5 passer rating.

Did you know ... Robinson's mother attended OSU, and his uncle was a former Pistol Pete, the Oklahoma State mascot. Also, Robinson was at the center of coach Mike Gundy's infamous "I'm a man! I'm 40!" rant last year. Bobby Reid had been benched in favor of Robinson, and Gundy was reacting to a newspaper column that was critical of Reid following his demotion.

What's on tap: The Cowboys have a tough closing stretch: consecutive road games at Texas Tech and Colorado, then a home contest against rival Oklahoma on November 29.

What they're saying: "This guy is very similar to (Texas QB) Colt (McCoy). They do a lot of the zone read stuff. He probably won't get as much attention as a lot of the great quarterbacks in the Big 12, but he does a great job of leading that offense. He's very fast on his feet, has deceiving speed like Colt has. He can run the ball really well and also has a great arm. He should be in the Big 12 quarterback discussion." — Brian Orakpo, Texas defensive end

— Derek Samson

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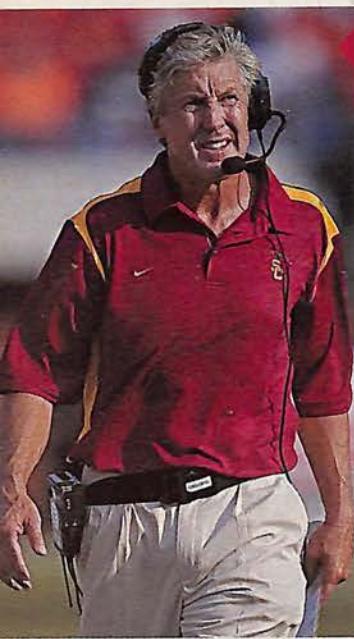
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Round and round it goes ...

The coaching carousel is always spinning. So which BCS guys will continue to enjoy the ride—and which will be asked to step off?

Poor Dabo Swinney. No one ever said the life of an interim coach was glamorous. And no one ever said ranking the nation's BCS coaches in terms of long-term job security was easy. From No. 1 (USC's Pete Carroll) to No. 66 (Washington's Tyrone Willingham because, well, he's resigned to his fate), we break down the coaches in order of most secure to the one with the hottest seat.

As for Swinney, Clemson's interim coach, he can be thankful Willingham is still around.



1. **Pete Carroll, USC**

2. **Jim Grobe, Wake Forest.**

If only one elite BCS program (Tennessee?), one situation, were tempting enough for Grobe to leave Wake, we could see what the game's best could do with top-level talent.

3. **Les Miles, LSU**

4. **Bob Stoops, Oklahoma**

5. **Nick Saban, Alabama**

6. **Mack Brown, Texas**

This year proves his 2005 national title wasn't entirely a Vince Young production.

7. **Mark Richt, Georgia**

8. **Jim Tressel, Ohio State**

9. **Paul Johnson, Georgia Tech**

10. **Urban Meyer, Florida**

21. **Brian Kelly, Cincinnati**

22. **Mark Mangino, Kansas**

23. **Steve Spurrier, South Carolina**

24. Charlie Weis, Notre Dame. You hate the Irish now, but wait until Weis lands a couple more elite recruiting classes. Those first two BCS years will pale in comparison.

25. **Bret Bielema, Wisconsin**

26. Randy Edsall, Connecticut. This program builder could have left UConn a few times over the years. Can the Huskies keep him when the top BCS jobs come calling?

27. **Dan Hawkins, Colorado**

28. **Jeff Tedford, California**

29. **Mike Bellotti, Oregon**

30. **Tom O'Brien, N.C. State**

31. **Jeff Jagodzinski, Boston College**

32. Joe Paterno, Penn State. For those who think this isn't Joe's last season: He now stays in the skybox the entire game—including halftime.

33. Ron Zook, Illinois. The Illini's regression this fall continues the "Coach February" talk. He gets elite players but hasn't gotten them to play to their potential.

34. **Dennis Erickson, Arizona State**

35. Tim Brewster, Minnesota. He's a charismatic personality, and he's landing top recruits in Minnesota of all places. But he's still developing as a game-day coach.

36. **Bobby Bowden, Florida State**

37. Bobby Johnson, Vanderbilt. A fiery, meticulous tactician who probably needs to jump jobs now (Clemson?) before all his good works at Vandy vanish.

38. **Jim Leavitt, South Florida**

39. **Houston Nutt, Mississippi**

40. **Art Briles, Baylor.**

A terrific teacher and play-caller whose development of fabulous freshman QB Robert Griffin will get him a bigger BCS job by 2010. But coaching Baylor in the loaded Big 12 South has not been kind to careers.

41. **Pat Fitzgerald, Northwestern**

42. **Bobby Petrino, Arkansas**

43. **Randy Shannon, Miami.**

Shannon can recruit and relate to players, but he still must prove he can get his team ready to play the Floridas and the Virginias.

44. **Jim Harbaugh, Stanford**

45. **Ralph Friedgen, Maryland**



46. **Dave Wannstedt, Pitt**

Just when it seems the Panthers are a legit top 25 team, Rutgers happens.

47. **Greg Schiano, Rutgers**

48. **Rich Brooks, Kentucky**

49. Paul Wulff, Washington State. You'd give up 60-something a game with 60-something scholarship players, too. It's way too early to give up on him as a lower-division success story.

50. **Steve Kragthorpe, Louisville**

51. **Sylvester Croom, Mississippi State**

52. Joe Tiller, Purdue. He's retiring at the end of the year and going out with a terrible season.

53. Kirk Ferentz, Iowa. His stock has fallen drastically with subpar seasons and the team's off-field issues.

54. Al Groh, Virginia. After all the heat he has taken in Charlottesville over the years, he has responded with his best coaching job yet—college or pro.

55. **Mike Stoops, Arizona**

56. Bo Pelini, Nebraska. He isn't off to a great start, and Huskers fans aren't exactly known for their patience.

57. **Gene Chizik, Iowa State**

58. Bill Stewart, West Virginia. He was a strange choice to run an elite program, and the decision looks more odd each week.

59. **Bill Lynch, Indiana**

60. **Ron Prince, Kansas State**

61. **Phil Fulmer, Tennessee**

62. **Tommy Tuberville, Auburn**

63. Mike Sherman, Texas A&M. Can you fire a coach after his first season? Not only is Sherman's team losing, it doesn't look prepared or motivated.

64. **Greg Robinson, Syracuse**

65. **Dabo Swinney, Clemson**



66. Tyrone Willingham, Washington. This may be Willingham's last stop. Those who can't recruit don't coach—no matter how good they are for the game.

11. **Mike Gundy, Oklahoma State**

Last year, he informed us he was a 40-year-old man. This year, he's showing that he's one heck of a coach.

12. **Frank Beamer, Virginia Tech**

13. **Butch Davis, North Carolina**

14. Mike Leach, Texas Tech. The Red Raiders know they're lucky some other school hasn't backed up the money truck in the driveway of the eccentric/brilliant Leach.

15. Rick Neuheisel, UCLA. Neuheisel will get players to Westwood, and he proved he can assemble an all-star coaching staff. Now, all he has to do is win.

16. **Mark Dantonio, Michigan State**

17. **Gary Pinkel, Missouri**

18. Mike Riley, Oregon State. Riley wins consistently in one of the toughest situations in the game.

19. Rich Rodriguez, Michigan. Don't let this meltdown of a season fool you. Rodriguez can recruit, and his system will work in the stodgy Big Ten.

20. **David Cutcliffe, Duke**

It doesn't take an eternal optimist to see Minnesota has a chance to go somewhere

By Matt Hayes
mhayes@sportingnews.com

You better believe 1-11 was bad. So bad, in fact, that when this year's Minnesota team beat Florida Atlantic, the game ball went to last year's seniors, who lost to Florida Atlantic and sucked up the god-awful season that paved the way for the beauty that is this fall.

By the time snow drifts accumulate to a foot or so later this month in Minneapolis, the Gophers will be well on their way to orchestrating one of the greatest one-season turnarounds in the history of college football.

From 1-11 to double-digit wins. That's a long way from trudging off the field last season on a steamy South Florida night, saddled with a loss to a seven-year-old startup program that plays in a high school stadium.

You don't just recover from that loss. Unless, that is, your mind works like Gophers coach Tim Brewster's. We see the glass half-full; he sees it overflowing.

"I'm a relentlessly optimistic guy," Brewster says. "I don't have time in my life for negativity."

Now we understand why Minnesota has accomplished this feat, this rare turnaround with essentially the same personnel as last season. The Gophers added a few players here and there, but the same guys who endured six losses by a combined 23 points are now winning more games than many imagined.

The Gophers don't play Big Ten heavyweight Penn State this fall and they lost to Ohio State, but they physically manhandled league co-favorite Illinois last month and could play in a New

Year's Day bowl for the first time since winning the Rose Bowl at the end of the 1961 season.

The next step in Brewster's rebuilding process: winning the Big Ten. After that, who knows? Minnesota, you know, has won 18 Big Ten championships and six national titles.

"If you've done it once," Brewster says. "You can do it again."

Now that's relentlessly optimistic.

Brewster doesn't have time for any negativity—or, apparently, for very many losses.



BREWSTER: TOM STRICKLAND / AP; DAVIS, GERRY BROOME / AP; VERICA: ANDREW SHURTLEFF / AP

Doin' fine on the sideline

Six coaches have orchestrated impressive turnarounds this year, and all six are on *Sporting News* columnist Matt Hayes' coach of the year ballot with a month remaining in the regular season:

► Tim Brewster, Minnesota

(1-11 in '07, 7-2 in '08). The best turnaround in the bunch, although he's still looking for a marquee victory.

► Nick Saban, Alabama

(7-6 in '07, 9-0 in '08). Hard to believe this is basically the same team—with a few impact newcomers—that lost at home last season to Louisiana-Monroe. The Tide now play harder and are better prepared mentally for inevitable weekly highs and lows.

► Butch Davis, North Carolina

(4-8 in '07, 6-2 in '08). Two impressive recruiting classes have quickly made the Tar Heels a factor in the ACC. Davis is working on another big class for February, and UNC will be the team to beat in the ACC next season.



Davis' stellar recruiting will give him the ACC's best team next season.

► Mike Gundy, Oklahoma State

(7-6 in '07, 8-1 in '08). Who would've thought Gundy would be at this end of the spectrum after last year's infamous tirade that made him a star on YouTube? He's a terrific X's and O's coach whose game-day acumen grows each week.

► Paul Johnson, Georgia Tech

(7-6 in '07, 7-2 in '08). It's more than just the funky flexbone offense. Tech has bought into Johnson's scheme and his meticulous attitude.

► Mark Dantonio, Michigan State

(7-6 in '07, 8-2 in '08). The Spartans have embraced Dantonio's tough-guy, no-excuses, no-frills style. For the first time in years, MSU is getting stronger in the second half instead of wilting.

Winners never quit

In another Year of the Quarterback, several starters have managed to get through rough times to help their teams become contenders in their conferences. Three of the more resilient QBs:

► JOHN PARKER WILSON

Alabama senior

Then: Coaching and coordinator changes stifled his growth.

Now: He has improved his completion rate from 55.2 percent last year to 60.8 this season, and he's leading No. 1 Alabama in its quest for a national title.

Coach Nick Saban says: "John Parker has done a good job of being a leader. He's much more businesslike in his approach, making his decisions, and a lot less emotional."



► MARC VERICA

Virginia sophomore

Then: He didn't play last year as a freshman and was beat out by Peter Lalich for the starting job in August.

Now: Verica became the starter in Week 3. He did not lose in four October games, completing 72.0 percent of his passes during the month.

Coach Al Groh says: "He has a solid foundation, and he and (offensive coordinator) Michael (Groh) have a very high level of connection. He's had to work on his game for a considerable amount of time. He just kept plugging."

► BILL STULL

Pitt junior

Then: An injury cost him all but one game last season, and after three years at the school, the highly touted recruit had played in only seven total games (one as a starter).

Now: Although the injury bug bit again—Stull sat out of Pitt's November 1 win over Notre Dame with a concussion—he has had a solid season for a team that is 6-2 after going 5-7 a year ago.

Coach Dave Wannstedt says: "He's more confident with what he's doing out there now from an execution standpoint than he was at the beginning of the season. He's just more confident in his ability to make those plays."

— Dave Curtis

With half the results in, I'm projecting Titans over Giants



John Elway

We're at halftime of the NFL season, so it's natural to take stock of what's happened. We've seen a lot of All-Pro players get hurt, like Tom Brady and Shawne Merriman, and a bunch of others underwhelm us—yeah, T.O., I'm talking about you. And we've already seen three coaches fired with a few more barely hanging on.

The one thing that has stood out to me is the mediocrity of the AFC. We're used to seeing a handful of AFC teams superior to anyone in the NFC. This year, with the exception of the Titans, the NFC clearly has the majority of the elite teams. Still, my midseason picks are pretty balanced:

MVP: Clinton Portis, RB, Redskins. Portis is among the league leaders in rushing and is on pace to run for 1,888 yards. Plus, the upstart Redskins are just behind the first-place Giants in the NFL's toughest division.

Rookie of the year: Chris Johnson, RB, Titans. He is a home run threat on every touch, which makes him a great complement to bruiser LenDale White.

Comeback player of the year: Kerry Collins, QB, Titans. He got the job because of Vince Young's poor play and minor knee injury. By making quick and smart decisions with the ball, Collins remained the starter even after Young got healthy.

Coach of the year: Jeff Fisher, Titans. It's hard not to pick the Redskins' Jim Zorn. But, hey, the Titans are undefeated and at times have been dominant, especially on defense. Plus, the Tennessee players seemingly all deflect credit Fisher's way.

Most memorable moment: Falcons QB Matt Ryan's



You don't hear a lot about Delhomme, but he and the Panthers get the job done.

laser 26-yard pass to Michael Jenkins with 1 second left, setting up the game-winning 48-yard field goal to beat the Bears. Of course, it wouldn't have been possible except for Lovie Smith's crazy squib kick—worst coaching decision of the season—to set up the Falcons in great field position.

AFC champion: Titans. They wear down opponents with physical play on both sides of the ball. The Titans just might have the best offensive line in football, and they definitely have the best defensive line.

NFC champion: Giants. The offense is better than ever with the physical running game and a fully mature Eli Manning. And the Giants just seem to send wave after wave of pass rushers at opposing QBs.

Super Bowl winner: Titans. Physical beats physical. Collins' play will be critical.

Toughest player to game-plan for (offense): Brian Westbrook, RB, Eagles. He can run the ball inside and out, and he is a great receiver out of the backfield. The only thing that ever stops him is himself; he currently is playing through a rib injury.

Toughest player to game-plan for (defense): Albert Haynesworth, DT, Titans. He is in the best shape of his life and seems to clog up two or three gaps inside. Plus, he is collapsing the pocket more this year and pushing quarterbacks into Jevon Kearse and Kyle Vanden Bosch. You can't game-plan against brute strength.

Most disappointing team: Chargers. What happened to the defense? Merriman is out, but where is everybody else? New coordinator Ron Rivera better figure it out fast.

Most surprising team: Redskins. Zorn has done a tremendous job in his first year.

Most improved team: Falcons. This franchise was about as down and out as possible in the wake of ex-quarterback Michael Vick's criminal activity and ex-coach Bobby Petrino's betrayal. But new coach Mike Smith changed the culture with a big hand from free-agent running back Michael Turner and rookie quarterback Ryan.

Most underrated player: Jake Delhomme, QB, Panthers. Jake is the Joe the Plumber of football players. He works hard and gets the job done. Nothing flashy, but he wins. He is tough and plays his best at crunch time, too, and his teammates really believe in him. The Panthers will be a factor in the tough NFC.

Most overrated player: Terrell Owens, WR, Cowboys. He has been a nonfactor when his team needs him most. How long will it be until he blows his lid again?

John Elway, a Pro Football Hall of Fame quarterback, is a regular contributor to Sporting News.

Crystal football

With half the season in the books, we asked 60 players to peer into the future and tell us how the rest of the season will turn out:

Which team will win the Super Bowl?

» Titans	19
» Giants	18
» Redskins	7
» Steelers	7
» Cowboys	2

Five teams received one vote

Survey says: If the top two teams are any indication, there's a clear-cut formula to success right now—power up the running game with multiple backs and load up the defensive line so it can get a lot of pressure without blitzing. In case you wondered about this potential Super Bowl matchup: The Giants and Titans last played in 2006, when Tennessee won, 24-21, in Nashville.



Who is the midseason offensive MVP?

» Drew Brees, Saints	23
» Clinton Portis, Redskins	13
» Kerry Collins, Titans	4
» Eli Manning, Giants	4
» Marion Barber, Cowboys	2
» Chris Johnson, Titans	2
» Michael Turner, Falcons	2
» Kurt Warner, Cardinals	2

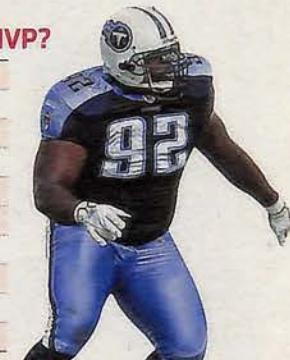
Seven players received one vote

Survey says: Even though the Saints are 4-4 and in last place in the NFC South, players around the league couldn't ignore Brees' numbers, one in particular. With 2,563 passing yards halfway through, Brees is on pace to break Dan Marino's single-season record of 5,084 set in 1984.

Who is the midseason defensive MVP?

» Albert Haynesworth, Titans	15
» Joey Porter, Dolphins	8
» Terrell Suggs, Ravens	4
» DeMarcus Ware, Cowboys	4
» Charles Woodson, Packers	4
» John Abraham, Falcons	3
» James Harrison, Steelers	3
» London Fletcher, Redskins	2
» Ray Lewis, Ravens	2
» Kevin Williams, Vikings	2

Twelve players received one vote



Survey says: A 6-6, 320-pound game plan wrecker in the middle, Haynesworth is the best player in the league right now. His ability to dominate blocking schemes, against the run and pass, is the biggest reason the Titans are undefeated.

Which team is the biggest surprise?

» Titans	20
» Bills	15
» Dolphins	4
» Falcons	4
» Cardinals	3
» Chargers	3
» Colts	3
» Redskins	2

Five teams received one vote

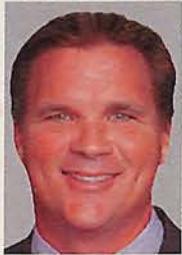
Survey says: We gave players the flexibility to vote for the best or worst surprise. Even though a few votes came in for the stunningly mediocre Colts and Chargers, players couldn't ignore the high jumps of Tennessee and Buffalo. The undefeated Titans may be a surprise, but year in, year out, nobody gets more out of his team than Jeff Fisher.

—Carl Moritz

It's time for some changes at the top

With a healthy Peyton Manning rediscovering his rhythm, a healthy Joseph Addai awakening a dormant running game and a healthy Bob Sanders boosting the defense, no NFL team will be more dangerous in the second half of the season than the Colts.

Talent and fewer injury issues will put Indianapolis atop the late risers, but there are a few more changes ahead—both good and bad—that may not be so obvious:



Brian Baldinger

5 up

Ravens. It all starts with the league's best run defense and superb special teams, the specialty of first-year coach John Harbaugh. On offense, with Cam Cameron's creative play-calling helping rookie quarterback Joe Flacco, the Ravens have found ways to score enough points. The scheming has Flacco (6-6, 230) getting better each week. His frame also suits him well for the cold, windy months ahead in the AFC North.

Texans. Their offense is thriving with a simple but very effective passing game—with a premier go-to wide receiver (Andre Johnson), an ideal No. 2 (Kevin Walter), an athletic tight end (Owen Daniels) and a good receiving back (Steve Slaton). In the running

game, Slaton is just getting warmed up. The Texans just need to get better at finishing close games.

Dolphins. No one can take them lightly after wins over the Patriots, Chargers, Bills and Broncos. Chad Pennington and Joey Porter have proved they have a lot left. With every week, they improve under team boss Bill Parcells and coach Tony Sparano. Watch out if Ted Ginn, after his breakout game in Week 8, becomes a consistent playmaker.

Eagles. With a swarming defense that coordinator Jim Johnson has playing as well as the Giants' unit, they're not afraid of New York. Having a healthier Brian Westbrook is critical to consistency on offense. The experience of Donovan McNabb and coach Andy Reid also can't be discounted.

Buccaneers. Monte Kiffin's defense is flat-out knocking people off the ball with young stars such as Barrett Ruud and Tanard Jackson helping out longtime leaders Derrick Brooks and Ronde Barber. The offense should be more consistently productive with Jeff Garcia at quarterback.

5 down

Broncos. They have won some shootouts, but their terrible defense will catch up with them—it has no potential for a quick fix.

Vikings. Something is just a little off. They can't find steady quarterback play, and Adrian Peterson hasn't consistently shown the pop he did last season. If Kevin and Pat Williams are suspended, the defense will fall apart.

Saints. They also face possible suspensions to key players Deuce McAllister, Charles Grant and Will Smith. Drew Brees can't make up for the team's poor defense every week.

Patriots. Matt Cassel is playing better at quarterback, but the aging linebackers and makeshift secondary are big concerns.

Steelers. Ben Roethlisberger can't keep taking all those hits. They won't be able to do much against a tough schedule if Big Ben goes on the shelf.

Brian Baldinger, an NFL offensive lineman for 11 seasons, is a regular contributor to Sporting News, Sporting News Today and Sporting News Radio.

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THURSDAY
NIGHT
FOOTBALL



NETWORK

THURSDAY NOV 6

BRONCOS vs BROWNS

KICKOFF AT 8PM ET

THURSDAY NOV 13

JETS vs PATRIOTS

KICKOFF AT 8PM ET

Q&A with Wes Welker

Forget about looking the part. After the Patriots acquired 5-9, 185-pound Wes Welker from the Dolphins before last season, he took over the slot and promptly tied for the league lead with 112 receptions. In Week 9, he joined former Jaguars receiver Jimmy Smith as the only players to open a season with at least six catches in each of the first eight games. Still, the NFL's busiest wideout took time to catch what *Sporting News*' Albert Breer threw at him.

SN: Do you ever get sick of hearing how you're the plucky, scrappy receiver?

WELKER: Not really. It doesn't bother me. I know what my skills are; no real outside talk about me affects me or the way I play.

SN: How did your background—fighting to get a college scholarship and then fighting to get in the league—help you?

WELKER: It's taught the work ethic that I have, even now. I've continued to do the things that got me to where I am now. It's really helped out in that way, where it hasn't ever been given to me. I always had to work for it.

SN: Your school, Texas Tech, was at the forefront of the influx of college spread offenses. Has that helped you in the NFL?

WELKER: Definitely. Being able to run that many routes, throwing the ball 50, 60 times a game, it definitely helped with my skills, especially with 2-minute offense, no-huddle, things like that. It's made me aware of everything around me.

SN: Why was New England the perfect fit for you?

WELKER: Just the mentality here, the guys and the system in place. They use the slot really well. I saw what they did with Troy Brown for a lot of years, and we're similar in a lot of ways.

SN: Was the Super Bowl loss the toughest you've had to take?

WELKER: I mean, yeah, of course.

SN: So what's going through your mind when you have that amount of success and it falls flat?

WELKER: That we had to get ready for this year, making sure you're ready for this year.

SN: So you went right to that coming off the field?

WELKER: Yeah, you got to. You've gotta move on, make sure you're ready and set your goals high again.



Nothing stops the Saints' offense

Pro Bowl players go down, and New Orleans' offense keeps humming. The Saints have the NFL's top offense (403.1 yards per game), but how do they do it with so many key players missing? We went to RealScouts for answers.

1. The system. Coach Sean Payton uses three- and four-receiver sets to spread the defense and create space for the short- and medium-range throws Drew Brees loves. The slot receivers align close to the tackles and work the short zones inside the numbers, which allows for quicker and more accurate passes. The wide receivers often align in "bunch" formations to create natural picks and allow for multiple reads. The receivers also run combo routes to force the safeties to make a choice—usually the deep route, which leaves the short receivers facing man-to-man coverage.

2. The quarterback. The ball doesn't spend a lot of time in Brees' hands. He has a quick release and goes through progressions fast, even when he has four or five reads. His deft decision making keeps defensive coordinators from calling blitzes.

3. The receivers. Brees' list of weapons is long and interchangeable. Marques Colston, Devery Henderson, David Patten, Lance Moore and Robert Meachem all contribute when healthy. Each is fast and has the burst to explode out of cuts and turn any catch into a big play.

4. The line. This group is strong and athletic. Brees has been sacked just seven times in 304 pass attempts. Even with four or five receivers in the game, the Saints often block blitzes and stunts with just five linemen.

5. Thunder and lightning. Reggie Bush creates havoc. More receiver than runner, he lines up all over the field—in the slot, out wide, offset or in the I-formation—to get the ball in space and outrun defenders. He makes linebackers look silly in the open field, and when safeties cover him it leaves wide receivers facing single coverage. Deuce McAllister gets the tough yards inside and punishes defenses for using nickel and dime personnel.

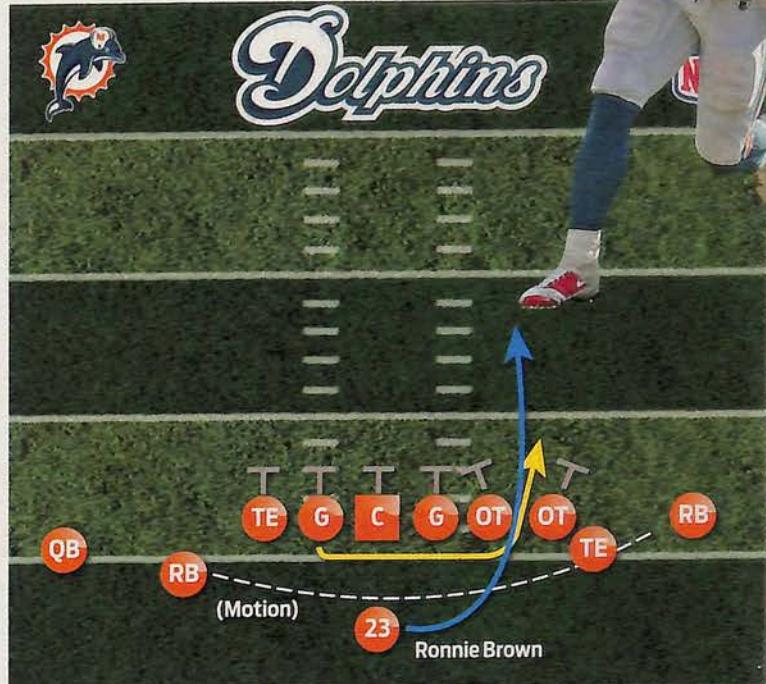
RealScouts, a team of pro football scouts, analyzes NFL players, coaches and teams exclusively for Sporting News. For more observations, go to realscouts.com.

My favorite play



By Dolphins RB Ronnie Brown

The Dolphins call it:
Power from the Wildcat formation
You know it as: The play where the running back takes the snap

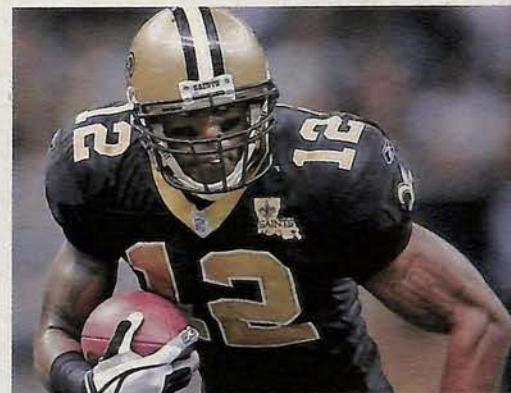


What's my favorite play? I can answer that pretty easily: any play I score on. But, really, even though I like the Wildcat package because it's a new opportunity, my favorite play is still one we call Power. It's pretty basic, and other teams in the NFL, like Jacksonville, run the same play.

Even in the huddle, it's just called Power. Actually, it's one of the first plays we installed when coach Tony Sparano arrived in Miami. But I like it because it allows me to just get to run downhill. I like the quick-hitting plays because I don't really like running sideways. And we can actually still run the Power in the Wildcat formation.

When I broke for the 62-yard touchdown against the Patriots, even though I took the direct snap, we were still running Power because it's essentially a blocking scheme. I can't tell you too much, but the blocking is most important when it comes to successfully running the play. It's just a matter of finding a way to get downhill while reading the coverage fast so I don't have to run sideways. After all, I always heard the quickest way to the end zone was a straight line. Like I said, any play I can score on.

—As told to Jeff Darlington



Colston is just one of the weapons the Saints can go to on offense.

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No matter who runs down the QB first, the Steelers win

By Clifton Brown

cliftonbrown@sportingnews.com

James Harrison and LaMarr Woodley love to beat up quarterbacks.

Following in the great tradition of Steelers linebackers, Harrison and Woodley are having a sack party this season, competing against each other to crush quarterbacks.

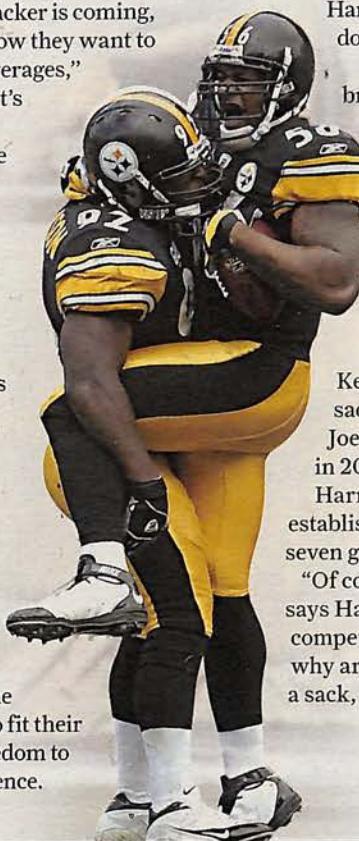
For the Steelers, their sack race is a win-win situation. For the opposition, it's a nightmare.

"You never know which linebacker is coming, so they can really be flexible in how they want to match their blitzes with their coverages," says Redskins coach Jim Zorn. "It's really a problem."

The Steelers' blitz package is the brainchild of longtime defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau. Like many teams, Pittsburgh plays out of the 3-4, but it is masterful at overloading one side and disguising which linebackers will blitz. When the Steelers get a mismatch—too many pass rushers for too few blockers—the race to the quarterback begins. And Harrison and Woodley often are the winners.

"To be honest, Coach LeBeau doesn't really ask us players for much input," says Harrison. "He tells us what to do, and we do it. That seems to work out pretty well."

It has worked out for years. The Steelers identify linebackers who fit their system, then give them more freedom to wreak havoc as they gain experience.



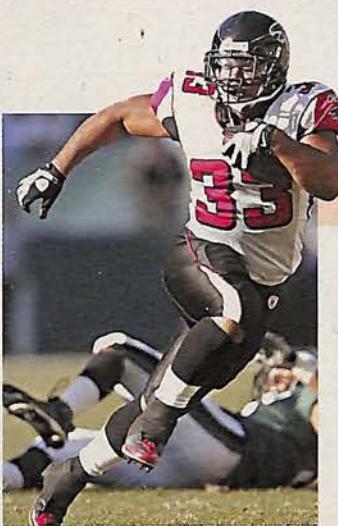
Scouts' Views: Free-agent progress report

Best signings

Michael Turner, RB, Falcons. He's third in the league in rushing yards and has helped take pressure off rookie quarterback Matt Ryan.

Kawika Mitchell, OLB, Bills. He is the leader of the new-look Bills defense and makes plays week in and week out. His physical presence and Super Bowl pedigree are important to a young team learning how to win.

Bernard Berrian, WR, Vikings. He started out slow, but after he recovered from a leg injury and Gus Frerotte was plugged in at quarterback, the speedy Berrian took off.



Worst signings

Ernest Wilford, WR, Dolphins. Signed to be a starter, Wilford did nothing in the offseason to improve and now is not even dressing on game days. Easy living—a \$13 million deal just to practice.

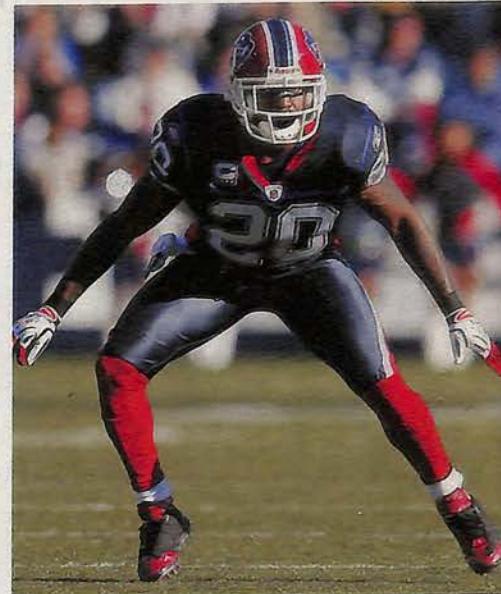
Jerry Porter, WR, Jaguars. He has had hamstring issues, but considering he was supposed to revitalize the Jaguars' receiving unit, he has been a bust.

Drayton Florence, CB, Jaguars. Yes, that's \$36.1 million (including \$13 million in guaranteed money) for 19 tackles and no interceptions. Bottom line: Jacksonville has had a tough year in free agency.

—RealScouts

Why make a guarantee?

Over the summer, Bills safety Donte Whitner made a bold promise to SN's Clifton Brown, forecasting a Buffalo appearance in the playoffs for the first time since the Music City Miracle traumatized western New York after the 1999 season. During the Bills' hot start, he expounded on what makes athletes play soothsayer.



Whitner has made the promise of a playoff berth, but he knows his job is only half done.

In some cases, it can be to motivate your squad because guys will already have a high level of expectation to live up to. By having one guy saying it, he's speaking for an entire team.

But when I did it, I didn't do it to motivate my teammates. We were already motivated—95 percent participation in OTAs and minicamp shows motivation to me. Guys were out there working hard.

When I did it, I did it to let people know: You're not going to come in here and walk over us, beat us up and use us as punching bags anymore. You're going to have to come in here and give us some respect, and you're going to have to beat us.

That's why I did it. People picked up on it. Some people said, "Oh, he's crazy. He doesn't know what he's talking about. They haven't made the playoffs in nine years." I didn't listen to any of that; I let it go in one ear, out the other.

I know it looks good right now, with guaranteeing it and then winning, but we have a lot of work to do. After we play our first 16 games, then we'll talk about, "Man, he guaranteed it. Are they really in the playoffs after a nine-year drought?" It's one of the longest droughts in the NFL, and that's why people thought I was crazy. But we're going to go ahead and break that drought this year.

—As told to Albert Breer



I Remember ...

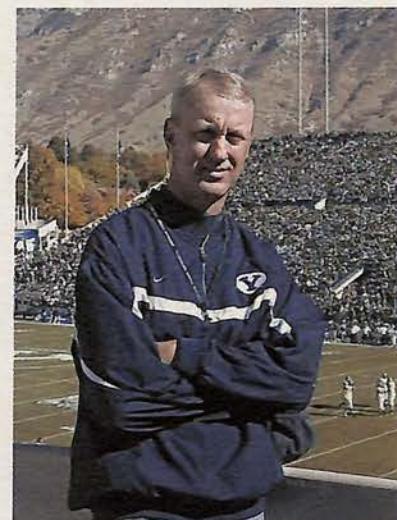
Robbie Bosco

BYU's national title-winning quarterback

In 1984, there was no BCS, no Harris Interactive poll ... and no stopping BYU.

Robbie Bosco, who followed Jim McMahon and Steve Young under center with the Cougars, led LaVell Edwards' 13-0 bunch to an unlikely national championship that season. BYU remains the only team not in a BCS league—or named Notre Dame—to wear the crown since World War II.

In the finale, at the Holiday Bowl, the junior threw for 343 yards in a 24-17 win against Michigan. Bosco never gets tired of reliving that moment, as he did with *Sporting News*.



Bosco remains tied to BYU today as the school's varsity club executive director.

I got hurt in the first quarter, injured my ankle, and I went into the locker room. It was one of those things where I wanted to hurry and get out there. I wanted to make sure the injury wasn't career-threatening. It wasn't, so I said, "Tape me up, and let's go."

I started warming up, and I'm like, "I can't do this, I can't drop back." I felt like if I could get into the game and get some adrenaline going, I might be OK. I said, "I'm ready to go in." Mike Holmgren (BYU's quarterbacks coach) looked over at me and said, "Are you sure?"

He put me back in and implemented, on the spur of the moment, the shotgun, which we hadn't used all year. I wouldn't have to drop back as much.

With a little more than a couple minutes left in the game, we knew we had to be precise. Bottom line: We just wanted to get in field goal range. But deep in my mind was, "You never can count on that. If we can score, let's score." The team was behind that.

On our last play, we were just trying to throw an option route to our halfback, Kelly Smith. I had to step up in the pocket and try to avoid being sacked. Then Kelly broke toward the end zone and I saw him out of the corner of my eye. I made the pass, and he caught it.

You know, any time you win, everything feels better. My ankle swelled up pretty good once I got the tape off. It was an emotional season and a fitting end.

—As told to Ken Bradley

The lockout's 'awful' medicine was just what the NHL needed

By John Feinstein

Gary Bettman could not have been more comfortable. He was sitting in the front row of owner Ted Leonsis' box inside the Verizon Center watching the Capitals play Vancouver. There were a few empty seats in the building on an October Monday night, but not many, especially considering the fact that a year earlier on a similar date, the place would have been half-empty.

"When I look at where we are now compared to a few years ago, I have to feel great," says Bettman, who was a few months shy of 41 when he became NHL commissioner in 1993. "What we went through during the lockout year was terrible—but not in the sense that I was ever in doubt about what we were doing. It was like taking medicine that tasted awful, but you knew you had to keep taking it to get better."

Four seasons ago, the NHL went away—for an entire year. All the buildings went dark while the owners locked out the players, insisting that the league's collective bargaining agreement be completely rewritten to include something the players desperately wanted to avoid—a salary cap.

"I told the owners we had to be prepared to go the full season," Bettman says. "I thought the union would stand by (then-union chief Bob)

Goodenow for that long but not into a second season. Things were so bad that everyone understood and was prepared to deal with what had to happen."

Back then, the NHL was a league in massive distress in every possible way. One of the reasons for the financial crisis was that its TV contracts had dropped to almost nothing. ESPN wouldn't pony up big bucks for tiny ratings. Local ratings in some markets had dropped to levels where they couldn't be recorded. Teams had been forced to move out of Canada because of the economy there. During the lockout, the league office had to lay off more than 60 percent of its workforce.

"We had people working on two things during the lockout," Bettman says. "Ending the lockout or the relaunch. That was it. We knew we had to be really ready when we started playing again."

The lockout didn't end until July 22, 2005—almost two months after the Stanley Cup would have been awarded and less than two months before the opening of camps. But two things happened in the 14 months after the Lightning won the 2004 Stanley Cup that gave the league hope.

One was a series of rules changes

that opened up the game.

The other was Alex Ovechkin and Sidney Crosby.

Although the NHL was filled with talented players, it had not had stars who transcended hockey since the retirements of Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux. Ovechkin, Russian-born with the ability to make plays that left even veteran hockey observers gasping, was selected by the Capitals in the last draft before the lockout. Crosby, only 18 at the time, was taken with the first pick in the postlockout draft by the Penguins.

There was a certain kismet involved in Ovechkin and Crosby arriving together in the fall of 2005 to what was, for all intents and purposes, a brand-new league. The owners had their revamped financial structure, and, as luck would have it, the league had two luminous new stars.

Some might argue that Ovechkin and Crosby would have been better off in Montreal or Detroit or New York or Boston—Original Six cities with great hockey traditions. In truth, those cities don't need an Ovechkin or a Crosby. Their fans will show up under almost any circumstances, just as they will in Philadelphia or Toronto or Buffalo.

But the Penguins were threatening to leave Pittsburgh. The Caps were drowning in red ink and empty seats. Ovechkin and Crosby revived both franchises and also helped with national TV ratings and licensing. When the league decided to play a nationally televised game outdoors last season, it wanted two things: snow and Crosby. It went to Buffalo for snow—naturally, the city came through—and matched the Sabres with Crosby's Penguins. *Voila!* NBC got a huge rating, actually beating out bowl games on New Year's Day. This year, the outdoor game will be at Wrigley Field and will match the Stanley Cup champion Red Wings against the Blackhawks, who



Acclaimed author John Feinstein is a regular contributor to *Sporting News*. Feinstein has written 23 books, including No. 1 best-sellers *A Season on the Brink* and *A Good Walk Spoiled*.

have several rising stars. Maybe Ernie Banks can drop the first puck and the teams can play two.

Bettman now talks proudly about season-ticket sales being up 4 percent in spite of the economy. He points to the progress made by Versus, the cable network the league signed on with four years ago when it was in approximately 12 homes nationwide. The number now is 80 million.

"I can't think of a business in the history of this country where you went away for a year and came back to set records," Bettman says.

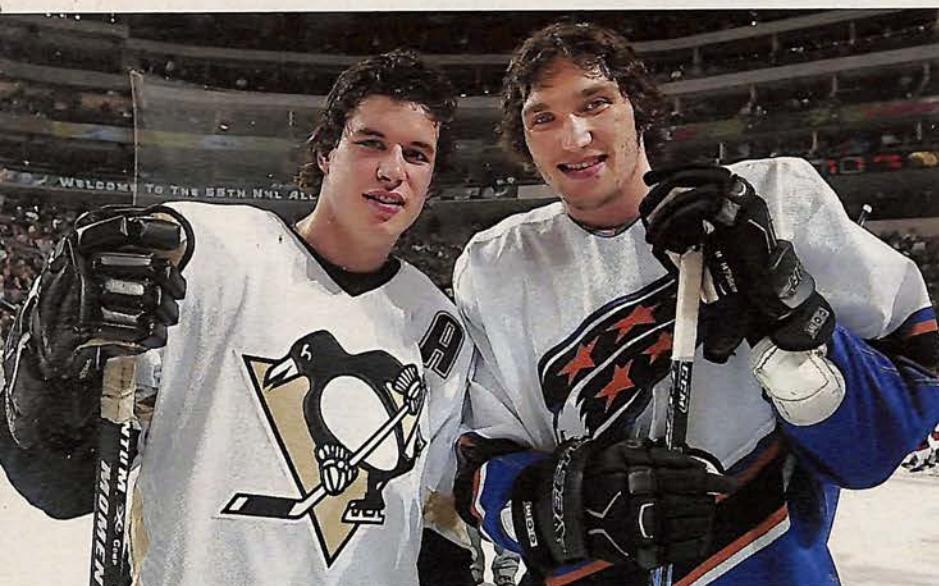
Bettman knows his league isn't ever going to be the NFL, Major League Baseball or the NBA. He's fine with that. Two summers ago, while Bud Selig was dealing with Barry Bonds and steroids, while Roger Goodell was dealing with Michael Vick and dogfighting, while David Stern was dealing with Tim Donaghue and refereeing integrity, Bettman was on vacation. His biggest concern was TV ratings.

Now, his next big decision will probably be whether to continue the league's relationship with the Olympics in 2014. "All other issues aside, the players would like to play," he says.

He sat back with a smile on his face. Ovechkin had just made one of his signature spin moves, and the noise was close to deafening.

"We're going to keep growing," Bettman says. "Everything we're doing now is working well. We're getting it right."

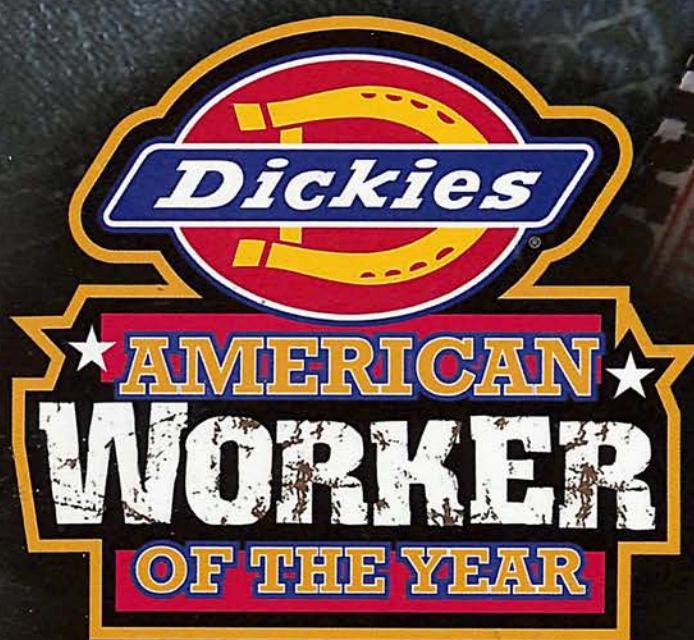
Slowly but surely, hockey is working its way back into the spotlight. Which is a long way from the time not so long ago when it was completely in the dark.



Crosby (left) and Ovechkin haven't singlehandedly saved the NHL, but they've had an awful lot to do with its renaissance.

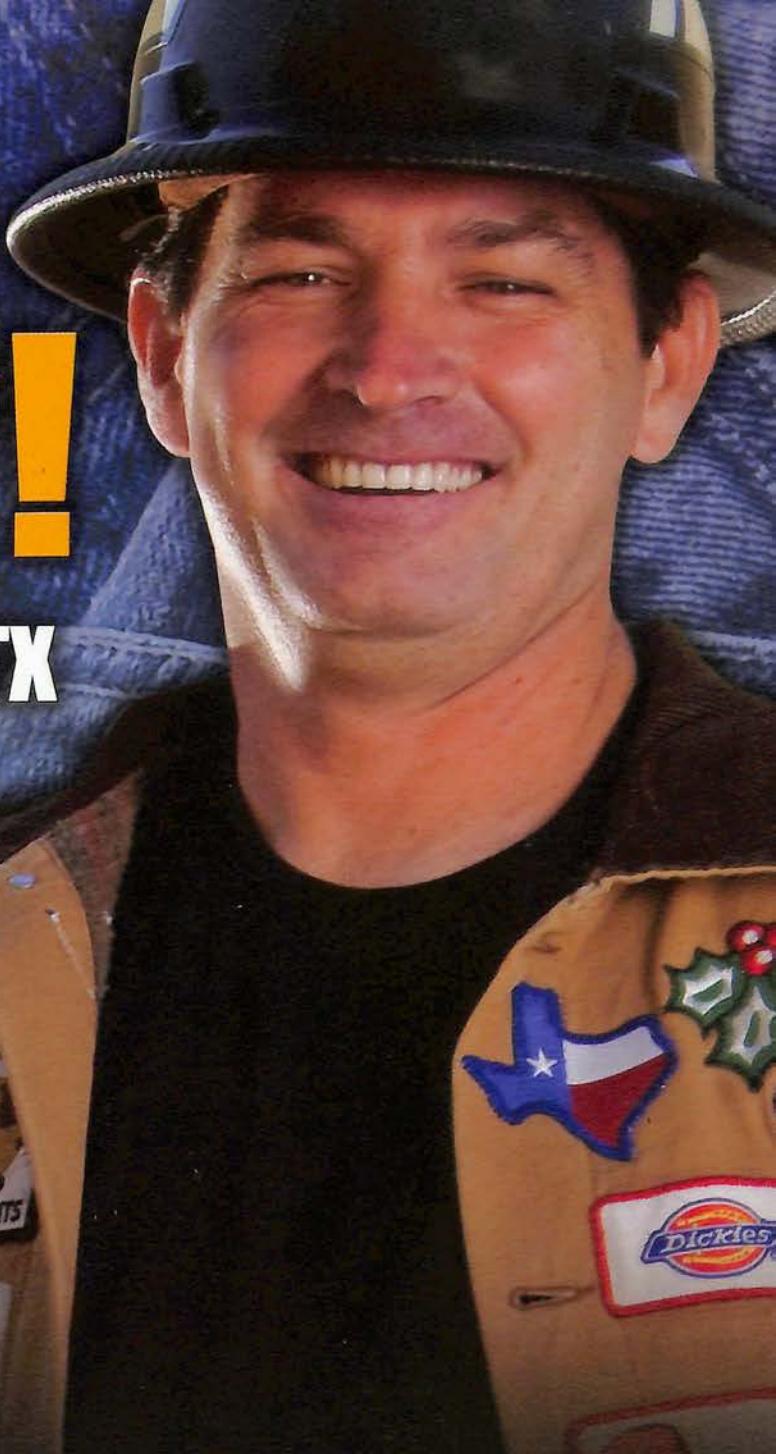
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